School nurses who suspect a parent is fabricating an illness in a healthy child must protect the young person as a priority.

The warning came during a talk at last week’s RCN school nurses conference on spotting the signs of fabricated or induced illness (FII), a rare form of child abuse when a parent or carer exaggerates or deliberately causes symptoms of illness in a child.

Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children honorary consultant child psychiatrist Danya Glaser said that authorities often focus on finding out why parents fabricate an illness, rather than protecting the child.

She said risks to children subject to FII, also known as Munchausen’s syndrome by proxy, include:

» Disrupted education due to school absences.
» Feelings of confusion when their parent or carer convinces them they are ill.
» Risk of physical harm or even death when a parent deliberately induces symptoms of illness.

Dr Glaser said reasons for parents fabricating illness in their child ranged from anxiety to fraudulent attempts for financial gain.

She urged school nurses to listen, observe, ask questions and to investigate any discrepancies.

She said: ‘We must remember there is a child involved, too and the harm to that child is the same regardless of parental motivation.’

Falling numbers of school nurses are putting vulnerable children at risk, the RCN has warned.

The RCN highlighted figures that reveal the number of school nursing posts has fallen by 13% since 2010.

This means there are now 2,606 school nurses in England, compared with 2,995 in 2010.

The RCN said the falling numbers put vulnerable children at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse because school nurses play a crucial role in identifying and safeguarding against threats.

RCN professional lead for children and young people’s nursing Fiona Smith said: ‘At a time when children are facing unprecedented exposure to influences like pornography and sexualised advertising, it has never been so important to equip them with a solid understanding of healthy relationships.

‘School nurses have the training and expertise to drive forward effective sex and relationship education (SRE) in schools. But with numbers dropping all the time, school nurses simply don’t have the capacity to follow this through.’

Ms Smith added that the RCN supports the call for SRE to be made compulsory in all schools, but staff are needed to deliver it.

Last week’s RCN school nurses conference in London looked at the challenges of helping children stay safe online and how the law deals with issues of sexual consent.

A survey by the National Union of Students suggested half of students learn about sex from porn, while two thirds receive no information about consent in their SRE lessons.