The clinical manifestations of pertussis in unimmunized children and infants are described as occurring in 3 phases: catarrhal, paroxysmal, and convalescent. Fever is generally absent throughout the course of the disease except for a possible low grade fever during the catarrhal phase. The first (catarrhal) phase lasts a few days to 1 week and is manifested by rhinorrhea, lacrimation and mild, dry cough. However, B. pertussis infection in infants may be atypical (eg, presenting as apneic spells without cough). These manifestations may be life-threatening and frequently are not recognized as pertussis.

Laboratory Methods for Diagnosing Pertussis Infection. Test Culture. Polymerase chain reaction. The incidence of pertussis in infants and children declined dramatically following the introduction of wide-spread immunization in this country. In the past decade, however, pertussis rates have been climbing. There has been a shift also in the age distribution of dis-ease. Although infants younger than age 6 months still account for the majority of reported cases of pertussis, older children and adolescents represent an increasingly large proportion of the clinical cases. Epidemiological features of pertussis in the United States, 1980–1989. Clin Infect Dis. 1992;14(3):708–719. 13. Cherry J. Epidemiological, clinical, and laboratory aspects of pertussis in adults. Clin Infect Dis. Children and young infants often appear very ill and distressed. Vomiting and exhaustion commonly follow paroxysmal episodes. The person does not appear ill between attacks. The clinical presentation of pertussis varies with age, and the diagnosis can be challenging. Disease in infants aged <6 months may be atypical, with a short catarrhal stage and gagging, gasping, or apnea as the prominent early manifestations. Whoop may be absent and the convalescent stage may be prolonged. Older children and adults can present with the classic symptoms of pertussis or with an atypical presentation. Among immunized individuals, particularly adolescents and adults, prolonged cough may be the only manifestation of pertussis.