

Helping Your Child Manage Medical and Surgical Procedures



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Medical and surgical procedures can be frightening for everyone. For a young child who may not understand why or what is being done, the procedures can be terrifying.

You can help your child manage the anxiety and grow stronger from the experience. You know your child better than the health care staff in the hospital. You will know how to adapt these suggestions for your child's age, interest and personality.

1. Find out as much as you can about the medical or surgical procedure.

- ▶ Ask questions ahead of time that will help you fully understand what will happen before you talk with your child.
- ▶ Ask if there is written material you can read.

If you know what is involved, you will feel more in control and will be better able to help your child.

2. Be honest with your child about what will happen.

Try not to hide the truth or leave out parts of what you think might upset your child. Although your child may be angry or upset about the upcoming procedure, telling him/her before the procedure builds trust in what you say. It gives your child an opportunity to work through some of the anxiety. It also allows you to reinforce with your child that you will support him/her through it. Being honest does not mean you have to explain every detail or dwell on the discomfort. When you talk to your child, explain what will happen in terms of:

- ▶ what she/he will see, hear and feel;
- ▶ who will be there;
- ▶ what he/she will be asked to do (e.g., hold out your arm, lie very still, curl up on your side).

Tell your child why the procedure is necessary (e.g. "This test will give the doctor a better idea of what is making you feel sick").



3. Give your child an opportunity to tell you what he/she knows or fears about the procedure.

Ask your child "What are you most worried about when you think of this test?" Sometimes children cannot explain what is bothering them. Your child may feel anxious with no specific cause.

Some other ways to help your child tell you about their anxiety are:

- ▶ playing with dolls and medical toys;
- ▶ drawing pictures and talking about the pictures;
- ▶ using stories.

Your child may need to do many of these activities over and over.

4. Discuss with your child what the hard parts of the procedure may be.

Will it be waiting for the nurse to get ready? Will it be getting the needle?

Here are some things that you can prepare to help your child cope:

- ▶ You could blow some bubbles during the needle insertion.
- ▶ You could play imagine – "imagine a really lovely place to be" – on the beach on a warm day with the sun shining and we're building a sand castle.

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- ▶ You could bring an 'I Spy' book to look at while the procedure is happening.
- ▶ You could put numbing cream (EMLA cream) on different spots of your child's skin to numb the area where the cream was applied. This will help your child understand what it will feel like when numbing cream is applied to their skin where a needle will be inserted. EMLA cream is available at your local pharmacy.

These plans work best if you go over them several times before they are used. Use a calm, reassuring voice when you are talking with your child.

If your child is younger, prepare your child for the procedure closer to the date and time of the procedure. Very young children need preparation within hours of the procedure. Talking about it too far ahead can cause your child to become more anxious or forget the information.

5. If at all possible, be with your child during the procedure.

Offer support to your child with your touch, smile and voice. Encourage him/her to use some of the coping strategies you have planned. Sometimes older children would prefer that you are not there during the procedure. Make sure you plan for this before you arrive.

6. Be a role model for your child.

No one expects a child to be as controlled as an adult through hospital procedures. The procedure will go more smoothly if you (caregivers) and the staff work together to encourage your child to cooperate.

One way to encourage your child to cooperate is to **be calm** and **very firm** about the procedure. **Do not** suggest by your manner there is any choice about the procedure itself, **but do offer as many realistic choices as possible**. For example, "which finger would you like to use for your test?" "Would you like to sit on my lap or on the chair?" "When it happens, shall we blow bubbles or sing a song?".

Do not bribe or threaten your child, e.g. "If you're a good girl through the test, then I'll ..." or "if you don't hold still, they'll do it again!" Your child may simply decide that the bribe is not worth it or panic about the threat.

7. Let the staff know how your child plans to cope.

Ask them to decrease stimulation in the room. For example: the voices of many people talking at once can add to anxiety. Ask if one specific person can do the talking to keep the room calmer.

Some children like to watch the procedure and what is going on, others may choose to look away while others will do some of both. Let your child choose what he/she wants to do. Do not force them to look away.

Remember, crying, anger and acting out are normal responses. If your child begins to act out, try these strategies:

- ▶ In a calm, confident voice, say again why the procedure must be done, and reassure that you are close and that holding still will make it go quickly.
- ▶ Let the staff know what they can do to support your child.
- ▶ Encourage your child to use distraction or another coping plan.
- ▶ Plan something pleasant to do when it's over.

8. Be sure to encourage your child.

Show pleasure for the way your child managed the procedure. Focus on something she/he was able to do even if all did not go well. For example, "You were able to keep your arm still even though that was hard for you."

You do not have to assist in holding your child still for a procedure unless you or your child want this. You may ask that staff do this.

You can contact the Child Life Department (Local 7686) and speak to a child life specialist to help your child with a procedure if your child is very anxious.

Developed by the health professionals of the Child Life Department with assistance from the Learning & Development Department