

# Preparing Your Child for Surgery



**Child Life Department**

4480 Oak Street, Vancouver, BC V6H 3V4

604-875-2345 • 1-888-300-3088

[www.bcchildrens.ca](http://www.bcchildrens.ca)

## Be honest with your child.

Being honest will help your child to trust you and the hospital staff. When you are honest with your child they will know what to expect and will have time to process the information. Ask your child open ended questions about their surgery, such as “tell me about your surgery.” This will allow you to clear up any fears or misconceptions they may have.

### Infants:

Infants will be hungry and may react to the change in routine and environment.

- **Bring familiar items from home.** Comfort items such as a blanket, pacifier, stuffed animal, rattle, or a familiar toy can create a more comfortable and familiar environment.
- If your child has a special sippy cup or bottle, bring it to use after the procedure.
- **Your presence will provide the most reassurance to your infant.**

### Toddlers:

Toddlers will be hungry and may react to the change in routine and environment. They may be frightened of medical equipment and unfamiliar people.

- **Talk to your toddler about their procedure 1 to 2 days before.** Toddlers do not understand the concept of time, and will benefit from preparation closer to the time of the procedure.
- **Use simple words your toddler will understand.** Talk about how their body will feel after their procedure.
- **Bring familiar items from home.** Comfort items such as a blanket, stuffed animal, or a favourite toy or book can create a more comfortable and familiar environment.
- **Give your child a sense of control.** Offer them choices when possible, such as allowing them to choose what stuffed animal to bring with them.
- **Your presence will be reassuring to your toddler.**

### Preschool Age Children:

Children often fear the unknown and may imagine the experience to be scarier than it is. It is important to explain to your child what they can expect. Preschoolers may believe surgery is a punishment for something they did wrong. It is important to reassure your child they did nothing wrong. Make sure they understand why they are having the procedure.

- Talk to your preschooler about their procedure 3 to 4 days before. This gives them enough time to process the information and express any feelings or questions they may have.
- Use simple words they will understand. Talk about what body part will be fixed. Explain if anything will be different after the procedure, for example, if they will have a cast afterwards.
- Explain only what your child will experience. Too much detail is not necessary. Use the 5 senses as a guide to explain to your child what they will feel, see, hear, smell, and taste.
- Play with your child prior to their procedure. This will give them a chance to express any thoughts or feelings they may have related to their procedure. They can show you what they know about their procedure and you can clarify any misconceptions they may have. Medical kits, pretend play, and colouring are great expressive outlets for children.
- Give your child a sense of control. Offer them choices when possible, such as allowing them to choose what stuffed animal or toy to bring with them.

## School-Age Children:

School age children have a better understanding of their bodies and may want more details. School age children may have concerns about the anesthetic and how the procedure will change their appearance. They may worry about not having control over their body.

- **Talk to your school age child about their procedure 1 to 2 weeks before.** This gives them enough time to process the information and ask questions. Make sure that they understand why they are having a procedure.
- **Use the 5 senses as a guide when explaining their procedure.** Explain what they will feel, see, hear, smell, and taste.
- **Talk about the anesthetic, or sleep medicine.** Make it clear that this is a different sleep than sleeping at home. Remind them they will not feel anything and they will not wake up during the surgery. Avoid using the term “put to sleep” as children may have experience with a pet being euthanized.
- **It is normal for your child to feel scared, anxious or angry.** Encourage them to express their feelings and thoughts, and to ask questions. Reassure them it is okay to cry.
- **Make a coping plan.** Help your child identify any concerns they have, then brainstorm ideas of what will help make it easier for them. Practice your coping plan before you come to the hospital. Share your coping plan with the staff.
- **Give your child a sense of control.** Offer them choices when possible, such as allowing them to choose what to pack to bring with them. Your child may wish to bring a robe to wear over their hospital gown.

## Teens:

Teens may want more detailed explanations about their procedure. Teens are becoming more independent, and may worry about loss of control and privacy. Reassure them that the hospital staff will respect their privacy.

- **Involve your teen.** Encourage them to be an active participant by learning about their surgery, making decisions about their care, and asking questions along the way.
- **Talk about the anesthetic, or sleep medicine.**
- **Make sure your teen understands the procedure.** Teens may not want to ask questions, leading adults to believe they understand more than they do. It may be helpful to have your teen explain to you what they understand about the procedure.
- **Encourage them to identify their concerns.** They may be concerned about the procedure changing their appearance, not having control of their body, or being in pain after surgery.
- **Make a coping plan.** After identifying their concerns, brainstorm ideas with your teen of what will help make it easier for them. Practice your coping plan before coming to the hospital. Share your coping plan with the staff.
- **Reassure your teen that it is normal to feel scared, anxious, or angry.** Some teens may want to keep their feelings private. You can encourage them to write in a journal or talk with friends.
- **Bring items from home.** Allow your teen to pack items that will help them relax or feel more comfortable, such as an ipod or a favourite blanket. Your teen may wish to bring a robe to wear over their hospital gown.

---

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