

Preparing Your Child For Hospitalization

For many children, hospitalization is the single most traumatic experience in their young lives. They can tell, from the way the adults around them are acting, that it's a pretty big deal. And if things get out of hand, worries and fears can make a trip to the hospital an upsetting experience, one that can carry over after the child comes home.

Parents naturally want to spare their children this psychological distress. However, some make the mistake of pretending the hospital is one great big party. Realistically, it is not. But, it also is not a place that any child should fear.

Openness and honesty are the best tools for preparing your child for hospitalization. Most kids are curious. They will feel better if they understand why they are going to the hospital and what will happen to them.

Children will trust their parents' word and reassurances if they encounter few surprises during a hospital stay. They also will trust the hospital staff more. They will cooperate better and generally have the best possible experience.

Preparation

Research has shown that children who are prepared for hospitalization and surgical procedures tend to recuperate faster and better than children who are not prepared.

Akron Children's Hospital's Child Life staff helps children prepare for surgical procedures and other medical experiences by offering age-appropriate information, hands-on familiarization with medical equipment and support.

There is a surgery/anesthesia video available at akronchildrens.org/surgery.

Here are some things you can do to help your child prepare for a trip to the hospital:

- Focus on the purpose: to help the child get better as soon as possible and to return home. Sometimes kids think they're being sent to the hospital as punishment. You can find out if your child has any misconceptions by asking him a few questions.
- Think about it from your son's point of view: a strange place, odd-looking equipment, unusual noises, different smells, sleeping in a new bed, unable to go home, cared for by strangers. Discuss with him what these new experiences may be like.
- There are many excellent books for children about hospital stays, such as *Franklin Goes to the Hospital* by Paulette Bourgeois and Brenda Clark, *Going to the Hospital* by Fred Rogers and *Good-bye Tonsils* by Craig

Hatkoff. Books can help your child become familiar with people and events in medical environments.

- Tell the truth: Some things may hurt. The most common fear is being stuck with a needle. Tell your daughter it's OK to say "ouch" and cry — even adults cry. Remind her that the doctors and nurses are there to help her feel better. It's unpleasant that pain is almost always a part of being sick or injured. But pain may be part of getting better, too.
- Pack your son's suitcase together. Bring pajamas, a bathrobe, a blanket, and a favorite stuffed animal or toy, labeled with his name. Let him pick out a special outfit to wear home. Leave valuables at home.
- Start an art project, book or puzzle before coming to the hospital, and plan to finish it when your child comes home. Or, plan an outing, picnic, movie or other special treat for his return.
- Bring along pictures of siblings, grandparents, pets, home — whatever is familiar.

Preparing for surgery

- Explain that surgery is sometimes the only way the doctor can get a close look inside your body to know what is wrong with you, or to make it better.
- Don't be afraid to prepare your child for what part of the body the doctor will work on. Even very young children know their body parts. Letting a child know, "We're going to see the doctor to get your ears fixed" is sufficient information for a toddler. If a child goes to surgery unaware of what is going to happen to his body, imagine his shock when he wakes up to a very sore throat after getting his tonsils out. Don't assume information will make your child more fearful. Age appropriate information can be very empowering for children and teens.
- Explain at your child's level of understanding about his medical problem and why the surgery is necessary. Don't use alarming language like "the doctor will cut you open." Instead, say the doctor will fix the problem and explain how many other kids have the same problem and also must get it fixed at the hospital.
- Bathe your child the night before admission. Your son will be given hospital pajamas to wear. Take this opportunity to talk about germs and why all the precautions in the operating room are taken.

Preparing Your Child For Hospitalization (continued)

- Remove any nail polish, contact lenses, make-up, eyeglasses, hair accessories or jewelry, including any body piercings before surgery.
- Your son won't be allowed to eat or drink anything for a certain period of time before surgery. A pre-surgery nurse will call you to let you know at what time all eating or drinking should stop. The nurse also can answer questions specific to your child. Make sure your child's surgeon has a complete medical history of your son including any medications he is currently taking in addition to herbal supplements and alternative therapies. Certain herbs and medications can interact and cause adverse reactions.
- It's OK for the child to take a favorite toy or blanket into the operating room.
- On the day of surgery, a child life specialist will help to prepare your child for his surgery experience. The child life specialist will use age appropriate information regarding what to expect during surgery, as well as medical play that includes some of the medical equipment and the anesthesia mask and psychosocial support to help your child get through the experience.

Coming home

- Common behavior changes include a change in eating habits, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, setbacks in toilet training or transitioning from baby bottle to cup, nightmares, an unusual fear of the dark, new play habits, and increased fighting with siblings and peers. If these become worrisome, talk to your child's physician. To help you prepare for what to expect by age group, ask the child life specialist to give you a *Changes in Behavior* brochure before you leave the hospital.
- Encourage a normal routine.
- Take time to talk with your other children about their feelings and concerns about their hospitalized sibling.
- Until your daughter has readjusted to your family's routine, you may need to reassure her that when you leave her, you will return.
- Finish those special projects and activities started before the hospitalization.
- Encourage your son to play "doctor" and "hospital" and draw pictures about the experience.
- Have modeling clay, wooden pounding boards, playdough and other toys available that allow the child to release frustrations.