

## Helping children cope with medical procedures

Parents and caregivers play an important role in helping children remain calm during health care experiences. To support your child, make sure you have the information you need to explain the visit. Talk to your doctors so you will feel informed and at ease. Children sense when their parents are comfortable and may become more relaxed themselves.

### How can I help my child?

A child should always be told ahead of time about medical experiences. You know your child best and will be able to judge how much time is needed to think about the visit or ask questions. These guidelines may be helpful:

- Toddlers may benefit from a simple explanation the day of the appointment.
- Preschoolers and young school-aged children may benefit by talking about the appointment a day or so in advance.
- Older school-aged children and adolescents generally benefit by knowing about appointments several days ahead of time.

Offer your support. Tell your child how you will help him, and that medical staff are helpers. Explain that what the doctors and nurses do will help find out more about how your child's body is working, and that these things also will help your child to get better and to stay healthy.

Never say that any medical treatment is a punishment.

Alert the staff if your child has had a hard time with an injection or procedure in the past. Do it in a way that won't embarrass your child or set the stage for another difficult experience.

Fear and crying are not signs of failure. These are typical responses for a child.

### How should I prepare my child?

Children are usually less afraid and feel more successful when they know what to expect and what is expected of them. You know your child best. The amount of detail you give will depend on your child's age and developmental level, reactions to previous health care experiences, and degree of anxiety about the procedure. Talking about it can help your child be more comfortable with it, which will make the procedure easier for both of you.

Most children benefit when you use simple words to explain:

- why the procedure is needed: "To help find out how your \_\_\_\_\_ is working."
- what parts of the body will be involved. Use the words familiar to your child.
- what your child might see, hear, and feel.
- that it is okay for staff to touch your child during the procedure.

- where parents or other significant care providers will be during the procedure: “I/we will be with you the whole time” or “I/we will be waiting in a room nearby.”
- that questions are welcome at any time.

For many children, a big concern is whether or not the procedure will hurt. Be honest. Don't promise that there won't be any injections or that a procedure won't hurt. Assure them that although there may be some discomfort, it will only last a few moments. Remind them why the procedure is important.

## How can I support my child?

**Before the procedure**, you and your child can:

- practice lying down and being “as still as a statue.”
- practice relaxing. Imagine being in a favorite place or doing a favorite activity.
- pack comfort items, such as a stuffed toy or blanket, some familiar books or quiet toys, a pacifier for very young children. Older children and teens may want to bring an iPod® or a hand-held video game.
- talk about how much your child wants to know about the procedure while it's happening. Some children want to be told each step in advance and also while it's happening. Others do not want all the detail; they simply want to be distracted and supported. Be sure to share your child's wishes with the staff once you are here.
- decide together what might make the experience easier for your child. Some suggestions for helping your child relax include singing, stroking, patting, storytelling, breathing slowly and deeply, blowing bubbles, wiggling fingers or toes, counting backwards by twos, and imagining a favorite place or activity.

## During the procedure

Research is clear that parents are most helpful to their children during stressful times when they offer distraction, rather than apologies.

- Praise your child often during the procedure. Be specific to behaviors, such as “You're holding still. Good for you!” or “You're doing just what we asked you to do!”
- Talk about familiar, positive things – what your child likes, places you've enjoyed, activities you're planning as a family, fun times you've had, successes.
- Imagine the places, things, or people you're talking about and describe them, or have your child describe them to you. Ask open-ended questions that encourage conversation rather than those that require just a yes or no answer. For example, “Tell me what you'd like to do when we go to the pool” works better than, “We're going to have a great time when we go swimming, aren't we?”
- Sing songs together. Play games that require thinking, such as spelling words or adding and subtracting out loud. Ask young children such things as which animals live on a farm or in the zoo and the sounds they make, or to name all the people in their family or class, and so on.
- Read the books you brought, hold a toy so your child can see and play with it, play “Can you guess?” and give clues about people and pets you know, things you see in the room.

## What can we do after the procedure?

What happens after your child's experience is just as important as what happens before. Don't make your child say "thank you" if she had a difficult time. Remember that children do the best they can at the time. After all, the procedure was done...that's success; congratulate your child!

Over the next few days, follow-up with your child, even if the experience was hard. Ask what it was like and repeat reasons for the procedure. Sometimes, reading a book about a similar medical experience can help your child talk about it.

Play can help a child adjust to and understand medical procedures. A play medical kit, along with a few extras like cotton balls, tape, and bandages, is a great tool to help children learn about their experience.

## What else do we need to know?

A family member or friend, age 18 or older, may stay with your child during most procedures.

The Sibling Play Area is available, for children age 2 and older, while you're at the hospital or clinic. Call to ask about hours:

Children's - Minneapolis, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor  
(612) 813-7501

Children's - St. Paul, 1<sup>st</sup> floor  
(651) 220-7150

If going to an appointment, plan to allow extra time to check your children into the Sibling Play Area.

## Questions?

This sheet is not specific to your child but provides general information. To learn more about preparing and helping your child cope with medical procedures, call the child life department. Child life specialists work hard to make every child's experience a positive one and help to minimize the stress children can feel during hospital stays or visits to the clinic, emergency room, or day surgery center. They are trained to help children understand and cope with medical procedures and can offer advice on how to talk with and support your children.

Children's - Minneapolis (612) 813-6259  
Children's - St. Paul (651) 220-6465  
Children's West (952) 930-8773

For practical advice about non-medical child development and behavior issues such as self-esteem, temper tantrums, and toilet training, call the Parent Warmline at (612) 813-6336. A Warmline volunteer will return your call within 24 hours to listen, offer practical advice and encouragement, and help connect you with other resources. All volunteers have professional training and most are parents.

For more reading material about this and other health topics, please call or visit the Family Resource Center library, or visit our Web site: [www.childrensmn.org](http://www.childrensmn.org).

Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota  
Patient/Family Education  
2525 Chicago Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55404  
9/07 ©Copyright