

# Preparing for Your Visit to the Hospital

## What to bring to the hospital

The hospital can be an intimidating environment for a child of any age, but the experience may be made less overwhelming by bringing familiar objects from home. Although the hospital rooms are too small for an entire toy collection, there is plenty of room for the following:

- A favorite toy or book
- A special blanket or pillow
- Home Movie videos or DVD's - the pediatric library has a collection of videos to lend!
- A collection of compact discs or music tapes
- The hospital provides a gown that must be worn for surgery and other special procedures, but it is great for children to bring their own pajamas for other times.

## How to talk to your child about hospitalization

1. **Be honest.** When describing the hospital experience to children of any age, it is important to be honest in your description and in answering any questions they may have. However, it is important not to give preconceived notions about what your child may feel. Caregivers should avoid the use of the words "pain" and "scary" in describing experiences the child may have since everyone feels pain and emotions differently.
2. **Use appropriate terminology.** Many medical terms can be confusing for children. For example, the term "I.V." could be confused with the word "ivy" or "dye" with "die."
3. **Provide examples.** Since children learn best experientially, provide as much information as you can to help the child learn about their upcoming experience. Describe what the child may smell, hear, touch, and feel using as many tangible experiences as possible, such as dolls, books, videos and hospital tours.
4. **Guidelines for parents.** The following guidelines provide more detailed information for parents to use prior to and during the admission of their child to the hospital.

## Pediatric Preparation Guidelines

### Infants (0-12 months)

#### At Home

Right from birth, every baby has his/her own personality. Your baby may like to be cuddled, tickled or sung to. Every day you are learning more about your baby's likes and dislikes. Babies are also very aware of yours and other people's feelings. They are sensitive to tone of voice, the way they are touched and sudden or unusual movements. They also become sensitive to their surroundings and any changes in it including a new location or new faces.

#### In the Hospital

Use what you know about your own baby's personality and try to follow these general guidelines:

- Do everything you can to reduce your own anxiety. Ask a lot of questions! Find out as much as you can about what to expect when you bring your baby to the doctor/hospital. You may ask about what your baby will look like after a procedure (swelling, bandages, etc.). Write everything down so you will remember what you are told and any questions you might have.
- No matter how young your baby is, try not to have medical conversations while you are holding him/her. These talks can be stressful and your baby will respond to your tension.
- Ask if you can stay with your baby during medical procedures. If that is not possible, stay for as long as you can. Give comfort by touching them, singing, or doing any of the things that you know are usually soothing.
- Bring familiar objects from home such as a stuffed animal, blanket, music box or toy. These can be used to help comfort your baby before, during or after a procedure.

## Toddlers (1-3 Years)

### At Home

Most people associate toddlerhood with power struggles. Children of this age are indeed pushing for independence but at the same time are still very much in need of their familiar caretakers. One minute you may be pushed away and the next your child is clinging for attention. Toddlers are balancing their desire for freedom with their need for nurturance. This is the age of exploration. Any exhausted parent can attest to toddler's learning everything through experience- touch, taste, smell, etc. Toddlers are also making the most of their new physical mobility. These young children have a vocabulary that is growing at an incredible rate but it is still very limited. This means they cannot always tell us what they need in words and they do not always understand the words we use. Toddlers are magical thinkers. They think they are the centers of the universe and everything that happens is a result of something they did or thought. Their imaginations are very powerful. Such thinking leads to creativity and make believe in art and play. Yet it is also responsible for fears and nightmares that might seem silly to adults but are taken very seriously by your child.

### In the Hospital

The hospital takes away a lot of the opportunities for freedom, consistency and familiarity for toddlers. New places, faces and sometimes painful procedures are very upsetting, but there are ways you can help:

- Do everything you can to reduce your own anxiety. Ask a lot of questions! Find out as much as you can about what to expect when you bring your toddler to the doctor/hospital. You may ask about what your child will look like after a procedure (swelling, bandages, etc.). Write everything down so you will remember what you are told and any questions you might have.
- It is helpful to have your child become familiar with healthcare experiences through toys and books with medical themes. *Curious George goes to the Hospital* and *A Visit to the Sesame Street Hospital* are two good choices or view some other choices on our Children's Reading List. Start this process as soon as possible at a pace comfortable for you and your child.
- Children learn best through play. Use play, such as role playing, as an opportunity to informally talk to your child about some things you have read about. You can find good toy medical/doctor kits at many stores in the toy department.
- It is best to tell your toddler about their specific hospitalization/procedure no more than 1-2 days prior to the event. This time frame is best because a child this age may forget what is told too far in advance or have increased fear and anxiety.

- Ask your child what they think a hospital is and what they think is going to happen there. This is a great way to learn about your child's misconceptions. Don't assume that because your child uses medical words they understand what they mean. Children often repeat what they hear adults say.
- Try not to have conversations about your child's care in their presence unless you are including them in the conversation. Children overhear much more than adults think and without any explanation the information may seem terribly frightening.
- Stay overnight with your child if you can. If appropriate, let other family members, including brothers and sisters, come and visit. When your child is going to a procedure ask if you can be there. If this is not possible, stay with your child as long as you can. Give comfort by talking, singing, reading or doing any of the things that you know are usually soothing.
- Bring familiar objects from home such as a picture, stuffed animal, blanket, music box or toy. Use these items to help comfort your child before, during and after the procedure.
- Reassure your child that the hospitalization is not a punishment. Try to avoid using good/bad labels particularly during a procedure. For example, instead of saying "See, you were so good, the doctor only had to do this once," you can say, "You did such a good job of sitting still, I know that was hard."
- If your child wants to, allow them to handle some medical equipment such as a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, etc. Allow them to practice the procedure on a doll.
- Allow your child to make choices whenever possible but don't offer a choice when none exist. For example do not say, "Would you like to come into the treatment room now so the doctor can look at you?" It would better to say, "Do you want to bring your bear or blanket with you to the treatment room?"
- If you need to leave your child for a moment or several hours, let them know that you are going. Be sure to tell your child who will be taking care of him while you are gone and when you expect to return.

## Pre-School (3-6 Years)

### At Home

At this age your child is developing social relationships, especially if he/she is in preschool. Children go from the world of "it's all about me" to learning how to play games and develop friendships. Imagination and fantasy is still very much a part of your preschooler's life. Children can use these fantasies to create a world where they are in charge or the heroes. They can also create magical explanations for situations they don't understand. Play is an important way for children of this age to learn about their environments and social expectations. It is also a way for children to communicate since their verbal skills are still not sophisticated enough to describe their feelings and/or concerns.

### In the Hospital:

- Do everything you can to reduce your own anxiety. Ask a lot of questions! Find out as much as you can about what to expect when you bring your child to the doctor/hospital. You may ask about what your child will look like after a procedure (swelling, bandages, etc.). Write everything down so you will remember what you are told and any questions you might have.
- It is helpful to have your child become familiar with healthcare experiences through toys and books with medical themes. *Curious George goes to the Hospital* and *A Visit to the Sesame Street Hospital* are two good choices or view some other choices on our Children's Reading List. This process should start as soon as possible at a pace comfortable for you and your child.

- Children learn best through play. Use play, such as role playing, as an opportunity to informally talk to your child about some of the things you have read about.
- It is best to talk to your preschool child about their specific hospitalization/procedure no more than 2-3 days prior to the event.
- Ask your child what he thinks a hospital is and what he thinks is going to happen there. This is a great way to learn about your child's misconceptions. Don't assume that because your child uses medical words he understands what they mean. Children often repeat what they hear adults say. Keep explanations very simple and related to what your child will experience directly.
- Try not to have conversations about your child's care in his/her presence unless you are including him/her in the conversation. Children overhear much more than adults think and without any explanation the information may seem terribly frightening.
- Stay overnight with your child if you can. If appropriate, let other family members, including brothers and sisters, come and visit. When your child is going to a procedure ask if you can be there. If this is not possible stay with your child as long as you can. Give comfort by talking, singing, reading or doing any of the things that you know are usually soothing.
- Bring familiar objects from home such as a picture, stuffed animal, blanket, music box or toy. Use these items to help comfort your child before, during and after the procedure.
- Reassure your child that the hospitalization is not a punishment. Try to avoid using good/bad labels, particularly during a procedure. For example, instead of saying, "See, you were so good, the doctor only had to do this once," you can say, "You did such a good job of sitting still, I know that was hard."
- If your child wants, allow him/her to handle some medical equipment such as a stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, etc. Allow him/her to practice the procedure on a doll.
- If you need to leave your child for a moment or several hours, let him/her know that you are going. Be sure to tell your child who will be taking care of him/her while you are gone and when you expect to return.

## School Age (7-12 Years)

### At Home

Peer relationships and socializing become very important to children in this age group. School age children are more and more independent from parents, participating in activities with friends through school or special programs. Your school age child is getting much better at communicating his or her needs to you and better able to understand what is going on inside his/her body. And does your child ask questions about everything? This is a very curious age! School age children are more aware of their body image and the changes their bodies are starting to undergo.

### In the Hospital

- Do everything you can to reduce your own anxiety. Ask a lot of questions! Find out as much as you can about what to expect when you bring your child to the doctor/hospital. You may ask about what your child will look like after a procedure (swelling, bandages, etc.). Write everything down so you will remember what you are told and any questions you might have.
- School age children can be given more specific information about what is going to happen to them. Ask what they think it means to have an operation/procedure. This is a good way for you to learn about their misconceptions. Continually ask this even after you have given an explanation to be sure that your child has understood what you have told him/her.

- This is a great age for medical play. Allow your child the opportunity to reenact events through play with different kinds of toys or art materials. This is an important way for school age children to express their feelings and gain a sense of control over what is happening to them.
- Try not to have conversations about your child's care in his/her presence unless you are including him/her in the conversation. Children overhear much more than adults think and without any explanation the information may seem terribly frightening.
- Encourage peer interactions in the hospital. You can do this by bringing your child to the playroom when he/she feels well enough and helping him/her keep in touch with his/her friends from home and/or school. Try to get schoolwork for your child so he/she can keep up with his/her class.
- Respect your child's privacy and encourage others to do the same by knocking before entering the room and being sensitive to who is around when examinations are being conducted.
- Sometimes children at this age regress, or start up behaviors that they had grown out of (thumb sucking, bed wetting, etc.), when in a stressful situation like being in the hospital. Encourage your child to express his feelings and discharge emotions through play.
- Stay overnight with your child if you can. If appropriate, let other family members, including brothers and sisters, come and visit. When your child is going to a procedure ask if you can be there. If this is not possible, stay with your child as long as you can. Give comfort by talking, singing, reading or doing any of the things that you know are usually soothing.
- Bring familiar objects from home such as a picture, stuffed animal, game, etc. Use these items to help comfort your child before, during and after procedures.
- Reassure your child that the hospitalization is not a punishment. Try to avoid using good/bad labels particularly during a procedure. For example, instead of saying, "See? You were so good, the doctor only had to do this once," you can say, "You did such a good job of sitting still! I know that was hard."

## Adolescents (13+ Years)

### At home

On their way to being adults, adolescents are again (like when they were toddlers) struggling for independence while still needing nurturing and reassurance. Peer relationships are paramount as is the desire to fit in and be like everyone else. Teens are also very conscious of their body image and physical appearance. In their efforts to be independent of their parents, teens will strongly protect their privacy.

### In the hospital

An adolescent is not in control in the hospital environment and much of what they so highly value is taken away.

- Do everything you can to reduce your own anxiety. Ask many questions. Find out as much as you can about what to expect when you bring your child to the doctor/hospital. You may ask about what your child will look like after a procedure (swelling, bandages, etc.). Write everything down so you will remember what you are told then write any questions you or your child might have. Share what you learn with your teen or even include them in the questioning process to help them feel in control.
- Try not to have conversations about your child's care in his/her presence unless you are including him/her in the conversation. Adolescents can understand much more about their bodies and what is happening to them and may resent not being included in

- discussions about their condition or treatment. Encourage your child to get information through the doctor or medical pamphlets/books about his/her own condition or procedure.
- Give your teen opportunities to discuss what is happening with staff without you being present. This may not feel comfortable at first but your teen may have questions or concerns that they are embarrassed talking about in front of you.
  - Accompany your teen to procedures when possible. Just because they're older does not mean adolescents don't still get frightened by the strange hospital environment.

*These are general guidelines/suggestions. You know your child best and may want to adapt these suggestions to your child's personal needs.*

## **Pre-admission visit**

Pre-admission visits provide an excellent opportunity for the child and family to visit the hospital, ask questions, and alleviate fears of the unknown. Child Life specialists conduct a discussion about what will happen during a procedure and/ or the child's stay at the hospital. Children have the opportunity to look at pictures of the hospital, play with medical equipment and dolls, and ask any questions they may have before their hospitalization. Caregivers are encouraged to make an appointment at least two days prior to the hospitalization by calling our Child Life Specialists (see below).

## **Children's Reading List**

### **A Hospital Story: An Open Family Book for Parents and Children Together**

By Sara Bonnett Stein (Walker & Co., 1983)

### **A Visit to the Sesame Street Hospital**

By Deborah Hautzig (Random House, 1985)

### **At the Hospital**

By Amy Moses (Child's World, 1997)

### **Chris Gets Ear Tubes**

By Betty Pace (Gallaudet University Press, 1995)

### **Curious George Goes to the Hospital**

By Anne Civardi (EDC Publishing, 1994)

### **Lee, The Rabbit with Epilepsy**

By Deborah Moss (Woodbine House Inc., 1989)

### **Let's Talk About Going to the Hospital**

By Marianne Johnson (Powerkids Press, 1998)

### **The Hospital Scares Me**

By Paula Z. Hogan (Raintree Children's Books, 1980)

### **Tubes in My Ears: My Trip to the Hospital**

By Virginia Dooley (Mondo Publishing, 1996)

### **When Molly was in the Hospital: A Book for Brothers and Sisters of Hospitalized Children**

By Debbie Duncan (Rayve Productions, 1994)

## **Why am I going to the Hospital?**

By Claire Ciliotta and Carole Livingston (Lyle Stuart Inc., 1981)

Please feel free to ask for our Child Life Specialists if you have any further questions or concerns regarding preparing your child for a doctor or hospital visit. You may also request to speak with them if you know your child will need extra preparation and/or support for a procedure (such as an IV, blood draw, immunization, etc.), or for a hospital admission and/or surgery. If a hospital admission and/or surgery is planned, you are encouraged to schedule a hospital tour for you and your child so that your family will know more about what to expect at the hospital.

Child Life Specialists:

Jessica Claspill-Garcia, Hayward Inpatient Pediatrics: (510)784-4219

Stephanie Costa, Hayward Pediatric Clinic: (510)784-4363