

Let's Talk About...

Helping Your Child Cope with Medical Procedures

Your child may feel nervous about having a medical procedure. As a parent, you may feel nervous, too.

But keep in mind that you are an important member of your child's healthcare team — and that there's a lot you can do to help your child cope with stress and pain. This handout tells you what you can do to support your child.

Prepare yourself and your child with information

Although procedures sometimes happen quickly (as in an emergency), you always have the right to be informed. Learn and ask questions about your child's procedure. Find out the steps, order, and timing. You can ask where the procedure will be done, how long it will last, and the equipment that will be used.

Once you understand the procedure, decide how to share information with your child. If you wonder how to do this, ask for help from a staff member at the hospital or clinic. For example, a Certified Child Life Specialist (person trained to support children in healthcare settings) can help you and your child. Carefully consider:

- **How much detail to give.** It can help to explain what your child may see, hear, feel, taste, or smell. Consider your child's age, personality, how much they need to know, and how much they want to know.
- **How far in advance to tell your child about the procedure.** The timing of when you share information can affect your child's ability to cope. For example, some children may worry more if they have a long time to think about an upcoming event. (Even a few minutes beforehand can seem like a long time for young children.) Other children need more time and concrete examples to help them understand, ask questions, and feel prepared.



Consider the suggestions in this handout along with what you already know about how best to comfort and reassure your child. Depending on your child's unique needs and wants, you can decide how best to support him.

Give your child a job

Depending on your child's age, it may help to give him a simple "job" to do during the procedure. For example, you could say, "Your job is to hold your hand as still as you can," or "Your job is to count until the tough part is over." Have your child practice his job a few times before the procedure and remind him about it during the procedure.

Offer emotional support

Listen to your child's concerns. Let your child express positive or negative feelings before, during, and after a procedure. Remember that crying can be a healthy way to relieve the tension of strong emotions. Your child will feel more confident and secure if you reassure him and accept the feelings he expresses.

YOU are your child's best source of support. You are invited to be with your child during most procedures. (The only time you cannot be present is when your child is in the operating room.) If your child's caregivers have not invited you, feel free to ask to if it's okay for you to be with him during the procedure.

Distraction ideas for different ages

For babies up to 12 months...

- Talk or sing softly
- Offer a pacifier or blanket
- Play music
- Touch or massage your baby gently
- If possible, dim the lights after the procedure



For toddlers (age 1 to 3 years)...

- Offer a favorite toy or an interesting new one
- Read a story together
- Play familiar music
- Blow bubbles or party blowers
- Gently rub your child's head or feet



For preschoolers (age 3 to 6 years)...

- Hold hands
- Count or say the ABCs
- Blow bubbles or party blowers
- Play favorite music or sing songs
- Tell a story
- Let your child choose whether (or not) to watch the procedure



For school-age children (age 6 to 12 years)...

- Give your child a toy or ball to squeeze
- Do some deep, gentle breathing
- Play favorite music
- Have your child count backwards or by two's
- Ask your child to close her eyes and think of a favorite place
- Let your child choose whether (or not) to watch the procedure



For teens (age 13 and older)...

- Do some deep, gentle breathing
- Play favorite music (earphones)
- Ask your child to close his eyes and think of a favorite place
- Talk about your child's friends, hobbies, or upcoming events
- Help your child find something humorous about the situation



Hold your child in a comfort position

The next page shows some ways to hold your child in a secure, comforting way during a medical procedure. (Healthcare staff can suggest a position that may work well for the procedure.) If you're close to your child during the procedure, you're in a great position to talk to her and guide her to take deep, steady, calming breaths.

Provide distraction

Distraction can ease stress and pain by helping a child focus on something besides the procedure and the situation. You can distract your child with a comfort object such as a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. Older children might like a hand-held electronic device with earphones. For more ideas, see the grey box at left.

Consider what else may be upsetting to your child

Besides pain from a procedure, other stresses may upset your child. These can include:

- Fear about current and future pain and whether she'll get better. Some children fear the medical equipment in the room.
- Stress caused by trying to be brave or from worrying about family members who seem upset.
- Confusion about being away from home, in a strange place, and with unfamiliar people.
- Concerns about privacy or modesty.
- Too much stimulation from the lights, sounds, smells, and activity of a hospital or clinic.

Be aware of other things your child might fear and see what you can do to ease her stress. It may help to talk to her privately and directly about her feelings.

Comfort positions

During a procedure, try holding your child in one of these positions. Your closeness can reassure your child and help the procedure go more smoothly.



Sideways lap-sit

Place your child sideways on your lap. Secure your child's arms with your own. Hold your child's hand.



Stomach hug

Seat your child on the edge of the bed or exam table. Wrap your child's arms around your stomach. Hold your child's arms in place with a firm hug.



Chest-to-chest hug

Place your child facing you on your lap. Wrap your child's legs around your waist and support his head. Your child's arm can go under your arm (as shown) or over your shoulder. Your child can turn his head toward the procedure or away from it.



Side-by-side sitting

Sit halfway on the bed or exam table next to your seated child. Hug your child's shoulders securely. You can also hold his hand.



Shoulder hug

If the medical team needs access to your child's mouth, nose or ears, you can hold your child over your shoulder. A second staff member may need to hold your child's head still during the procedure.



"Sledging" position

Place your child on your lap so that her back rests on your chest. Secure your child's arms with your own. You may also secure your child's legs by placing your legs on top of your child's ankles.



Knee-to-knee hold

Sit knee-to-knee with the medical staff person and lay your child so that her back rests on your lap. Put your child's legs around your waist and hold her hands with your own. This position lets you maintain eye contact with your child while giving the medical team access to her mouth, nose, face, and head.

Speak encouraging words

You can comfort your child with encouraging words — especially if you use a calm, soothing voice. The tone and familiarity of your voice can reassure your child even if he's too young to understand the words. Here are some suggestions:

- **Express confidence.** Tell your child that you believe in him: “I know this is hard, but I know you can get through this.”
- **Help your child focus.** Gently remind your child of his “job,” what he can do to relax, or what he can look forward to: “This will be over soon. What should we do afterwards?”
- **Show your commitment.** Remind your child that you care about how he feels and that he's not alone: “I'm sorry you feel sad and worried. I'm right here with you.”
- **Praise.** If your child becomes upset and has trouble staying in control of his feelings, praise him for trying to get through a difficult situation: “I know you're trying your best and we're almost done.”
- **Avoid phrases that may pressure your child to act a certain way or to feel guilty.** Many children think about the world as it relates to themselves. This is a normal part of development. But children can easily misunderstand healthcare situations. They may think that pain is punishment for something they did. Your child may have feelings of guilt and secretly wonder if she did something to cause the pain. So avoid saying things that may add to this misunderstanding or suggest that she is being compared, blamed, or accused. For example, don't use phrases such as, “Your brother had this done and he didn't cry,” “It's just a needle,” or “If you move, we'll have to do this all over again.”



Ending the experience on a positive note can help your child face future healthcare visits with confidence.

Stay positive

Try to end the experience on a positive note. Plan something special to do afterwards, such as playing a favorite game or doing an art project together. Compliment your child on what she did well: “You held your arm still and that helped a lot. You did it!” These things can help your child face future healthcare visits with more confidence.