

When Your Child Goes to the Hospital

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A TRIP TO THE HOSPITAL can upset anyone, especially children. Their understanding of the situation is often very limited. Frequently, they will not ask about what is going to happen, so they may imagine things far worse than reality.

Parents should explain as much as possible about the experience before a child enters the hospital. Some parents feel it is kinder not to "frighten" the child with details about the hospital trip. Studies show, however, that children who watch a film or talk with their parents about going to the hospital have less anxiety, are more cooperative with hospital staff, and have fewer emotional problems when they return home, compared with children who are not prepared.

There are many ways to help prepare children for a hospital trip. The following suggestions have worked well for many parents and doctors.

BEFORE THE TRIP

Timing is important when talking to your child about hospitalization.

Pediatricians suggest that, between the ages of two and three, it is best to talk to your child two or three days before hospitalization, because conception of time is very limited at this age. Between the ages of four and seven, they suggest talking with your child four to seven days before the hospital trip. Children over seven years of age should know about their pending hospitalization several weeks ahead of time, and experts have found it helps if children are involved in the planning process as much as possible.

Reading a book about going to the hospital can help your child voice fears and anxieties.

Several excellent books discuss what goes on in the hospital and what happens during surgery. Books on this topic can also help a child understand that the hospital stay will soon be over. Often, a child's greatest fear is separation from parents, family members,

friends, and pets. A few recommended books are:

What Happens When You Go to the Hospital by Arthur Shay. Published by Reilley & Lee, 1969. (Ages 5-10)

Johnny Goes to the Hospital by Joseph A. Sever. Published by Houghton-Mifflin, 1953.

Curious George Goes to the Hospital by H. A. Rey and Margaret Rey.

These books are available at most public libraries and book stores. A librarian may also be able to suggest others.

Explain the hospital experience and your child's feelings about it in understandable terms.

You and your child could pretend that a favorite doll or toy animal is going to the hospital for surgery. Using the toy, act out the procedures the child will experience, such as x-rays, injections, going to the operating room, having bandages put on, sleeping in a strange bed away from home, etc. You could also use a toy doctor's kit to familiarize the child with some of the "scary-looking" things in the hospital.

If your child is to have surgery, explain that medication will be given so the surgery itself won't hurt.

But remember to explain that, after "waking up" from surgery, he or she will probably feel sore in the body part that was operated on. Stress that the discomfort will be temporary.

Be honest with a child and make explanations fit the child's situation and level of understanding.

Don't say something isn't going to hurt when it will—if a child expects some discomfort, it is much less frightening when it occurs. You may also want to question your child to make sure he or she understands what will happen.

Contact your doctor and arrange for a hospital visit before the child is admitted.

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Many doctors and hospital authorities recognize the need for children to make a pre-hospital visit and are willing to arrange tours. Include brothers and sisters in the tour. Often, they are as worried as parents, and their fears and anxieties are greatly reduced when they can see where their brother or sister will be staying and know what will be happening. All this helps the child adjust to the medical environment, thereby lessening uneasiness when admitted to the hospital.

AT THE HOSPITAL

If possible, a parent should stay with the child the day and night of surgery.

Most hospitals recognize how frightening a hospital experience can be for a child, and provide "rooming-in" for parents, where they can sleep in the same room and share meals with their child. If no such services are available, and the hospital will allow it, sleep in a chair that night—but do stay. Being separated from you is your child's greatest fear, especially under the age of six.

Don't leave without saying good-bye.

Your child may cry at the time but will be much more alarmed if you are gone when he/she awakens. It also helps to leave for just a few minutes initially, then return. Your child may cry the whole time, but will ultimately learn you can be trusted to return and visit when you say you will.

Bring favorite toys or dolls.

Favorite dolls and toys chosen by the child at home can help provide a feeling of security at the hospital, especially when parents are gone. Some parents find it helpful to let the child choose a new toy for the hospital stay. The new toy could even be selected on the way to the hospital. Other parents promise to give their child a special toy after the operation, thereby giving him or her something to look forward to.

Make sure any agreements made between you and the doctor or surgeon are made clear in writing to the hospital staff and placed in your child's chart.

Such agreements may include whether someone may accompany the child to the operating room, whether your child may wear his or her own pajamas, etc. This can help prevent last minute changes that could disrupt the child's expectations of what is going to happen.

Visit your child in the hospital as often as possible.

If you cannot be there in person, make regular phone calls. Some children have been comforted by taking a family photograph or a recording of their family's voices with them. If brothers and sisters are allowed to visit your child, make every effort for them to do so. If children aren't allowed, encourage your child's favorite adults (grandparents, teacher, babysitter, etc.) to visit.

WHEN YOUR CHILD COMES HOME

Make a point to discuss your child's feelings about the hospital experience.

Many parents have found this helps their children sort out their feelings and gives them confidence to face other unpleasant life situations.

Don't worry if your child (especially a young child) tends to be more demanding, awakens frequently during the night, or seems to cling to you more than usual.

Your child is still adjusting from the hospital experience to being home again. This behavior will gradually disappear. Remind your child you will be there the way you were before the trip to the hospital. Some children fear that their hospital treatment has changed them in some way and they are no longer wanted or loved. Treat your child as you did before the hospital stay, but provide extra love and reassurance.

These suggestions have worked for many parents and their children, and can help make a hospital stay less frightening and more positive for both.