

## Preparation a Child for Surgery and Hospitalization

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### **Abstract**

Hospitalization and medical experiences can be confusing and stressful for children, teens and their families. It is very common for young people and their families to have many questions when they are scheduled for surgery or hospitalization. When children are given opportunities to cope successfully with medical experiences, they may see themselves as more capable, more in control, and more reassured. This success often leads to a more positive sense of self, as well as a healthier regard for medical procedures in general. Also, previous medical experiences can affect how the child will react to hospitalization. It is important to maintain a normal routine and activities, such as playing and schooling. Family and friend's child should be encouraged to visit the child patient. The best way to prepare the child for hospitalization is to prepare ourselves by understanding what will occur.

**Key Words:** Child, Hospitalization, Prepare, Surgery.

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## Introduction

Surgery can be a very traumatic experience for the child, who has limited cognitive resources to understand what happens with herself/himself and deal with situations that cause stress. The need to be hospitalized makes this an even more delicate moment, keeping her/him away from the safe environment of her/his home. In contact with the unknown and frightening hospital environment, the child has to undergo a different routine, which includes several invasive and painful procedures. The anxiety from separation, loss of control and fear of bodily injury and pain are some of the negative effects of illness and hospitalization that affect child development, especially in the first years of life, when the child is most vulnerable to these events (1, 2).

An extensive review of the literature revealed that most children prepared for medical procedures experience significantly lower levels of fear and anxiety as compared to children who are not prepared. Preparation also promotes long term coping and adjustment to future medical challenges. Key elements of effective preparation include the provision of clear and accurate information about the medical procedure and potential coping strategies, the encouragement of emotional expression and the establishment of trust with a health care professional (3-5).

Admitting your child to a hospital is undoubtedly a nerve-racking experience for the parents. For children as well, the overall experience is quite frightening and this is not only because of being separated from the parents, but also being in an unfamiliar environment on which they have no control. What makes the whole experience more startling for them is the progression of meddling and uncomfortable medical practices involved in this. Many a times, children associate this pain and hospitalization with

punishment. Thus, it is very important to make them understand that it is not a punishment; rather it is a boon for them. Reassurance is quite important before and while hospitalizing your child. A little reassurance and support can defiantly change the overall negative experience to a stirring one. There are a number of ways by which you can really ease the stress of your child related to the whole hospitalization process. An easy way to make your child comfortable in the hospitalization process is to make him or her familiar with the hospital ambience. If an admission date is finalized in advance, then it is recommended to take your child to hospital prior to that, as this will help him or her understand the working and the procedures of a hospital. Moreover, it will also give your child a chance to be familiar with the staff of pediatric department, so that during the hospitalization, your child does not feel that he is alone in the unfamiliar environment. Some of the hospitals also provide certain activities for children, so that they feel comfortable in this environment.

Thus do not forget to inquire about such facilities with the hospital staff. Also, check whether hospital allows you to sleep with your child in his or her room. Normally, most of the hospitals allow one of the parents to stay with the child in their child's room. It is always better to talk to your child and make sure that you tell them fact, as this will decrease his fear and apprehension to a great extent. Make your child understand that this stay is just temporary. Point out the similarities between home and hospitals; this will make their stay easier. Also point out the best things about this like regular meals, having own bed etc. Once your child gets hospitalized, it is always a good idea to stuff his room with some of his favorite things.

However, it is recommended to prioritize the things in advance, as hospital staff may

not allow all the things in a hospital room. Making your child a part of the discussions related to procedures can also make him or her feel relaxed. Also, encourage your child to inquire about his health and recovery status from the staff. A child always feels great while he is among his or her friends. Thus, calling your child's friends to meet him or her in the hospital is a good idea. Being hospitalized is always scary, and children are obviously more apprehensive about this. By your little effort and proper planning you can surely help your child to get rid of this apprehension and make his stay less stressful (1-11).

### **Materials and Methods**

These recommendations are based on comprehensive review of research literature by a panel of experts, with additional review of the proposed guidelines by expert consultants representing child psychiatry, pediatrics, and parents. Key words used in the data search were "Children", "Surgery", "Hospitalization", "Prepare", and "Parents".

Reference lists and bibliographies from review articles were the source for additional references. To evaluate the electronic databases the following websites were searched: Google, Ministry of Healthcare, Google Scholar, Scopus and PubMed. Also, library search was performed by referring to the journal archives of libraries, and evaluating the available Persian and English references, and also articles of research-scientific journals, and articles of the annual seminar of Pediatrics, Psychology and Public health.

### **Results**

It is understandable that surgery or being in the hospital can be a stressful time for parents and child. Knowing what to

expect ahead of time may help parents and children to feel less anxious.

One of the best ways for parents to prepare their child is to prepare themselves. They can gather information from their child's surgeon, nurses, anesthesiologist, child life specialist, and the Family Resource Library.

### ***Preparing Yourself***

Your child needs elective surgery and a date has been scheduled. Unlike emergency surgery, an elective procedure isn't done as an immediate matter of life and death. Having an elective procedure gives you the time to prepare your child for the hospital and the surgery. Good preparation can help kids feel less anxious about the anesthesia and surgery and get through the recovery period faster. But, like parents everywhere, you're probably uncertain about the best way to prepare your child. The key is to provide information at your child's level of understanding, correct any misunderstandings, and get rid of fears and feelings of guilt. Help your child understand why the surgery is needed and to become familiar with the hospital and some of the procedures he or she will undergo.

Kids of all ages cope much better if they have an idea of what's going to happen and why it's necessary. To do that, prepare yourself first and correct any misconceptions of your own. If a parent is anxious and nervous, a child will often reflect these feelings and behaviors. So educate yourself, feel comfortable with the process, and make sure all your questions are answered (9, 11, 12).

### ***Ask Questions***

You might have heard horror stories in the past about traumatic parent/child separations and very limited hospital visiting hours, but those days are over.

Hospitals have changed greatly and are more family-friendly and patient-centered. For example, many surgeries are now "same-day" procedures requiring no overnight or prolonged stays; most kids are back home, in their own beds, the same night. And most hospitals permit at least one parent to stay with the child at all times except during the operation. After the surgery, you may return to your child in the recovery room. As your child awakens, he or she will not even realize you left.

Ask the doctors, nurses, or staff for the information you need about what will take place so that you can prepare your child and deal with your own fears or concerns. To parents, one of the most fearful aspects of surgery is anesthesia. Anesthesia is much safer today than in the past, but still carries some risk. You should discuss any concerns you have in advance with the anesthesiologist. When hospitalization is needed overnight or longer, most hospitals avoid separation anxiety by permitting at least one parent to stay with the child day and night. Check with the hospital about its rules regarding parents staying over and when other close family members can visit. As soon as your child is able, he or she may be playing with other children, toys, and games in a children's recreation room — even if that involves taking along an Intravenous (IV) bag on a rolling support (8, 13, 14).

### ***Explain the Problem***

Now that you're more at ease, start preparing your child. Begin by explaining the reason for the surgery in simple, calming words. Explain at your child's level of understanding about the medical problem and why surgery is necessary. Don't use alarming language like "the doctor will cut you," "open you up," or "sew you with a needle." Say that the doctor will fix the problem, and explain

that many kids have this problem and must get it fixed at the hospital. Although they seldom express it, kids may fear that their parents aren't telling them everything that their health problem is worse than they've been led to believe. To build trust, don't mislead your child tell as much of the truth as your child can understand (11, 15, 16).

### ***Handle Fears***

Many kids fear that an operation will be painful. It can help to explain that a special doctor, called an anesthesiologist, gives medicine to make patients sleep very deeply so they won't feel anything during the operation and once it's finished, they'll wake up. (Older kids, in particular, need special assurances that they will wake up). Again, avoid frightening language, don't say, "You'll be given gas" or "You'll be put to sleep." Young kids may confuse "gas" with the fuel that can poison or kill and "put to sleep" with what can happen to sick pets. Explain that you'll be there when your child wakes up, and a favorite toy can come along, too. Tell your child that if anything feels sore right after the operation, a doctor or nurse can give medicine that will make it feel better.

Common surgery-related fears of young children are the possibility of separation from (or abandonment by) parents and the possibility of pain. School-age kids also fear needles, knives, and damage to their bodies. Give a child this age clear, rational information as well as assurances that the surgery is to fix an existing problem, not create a new one. The fears of teens go well beyond those of younger kids. Besides pain or change of appearance, a teen might be afraid of losing control, missing out on events, being embarrassed or humiliated in public, and sounding childish by expressing fear, anxiety, or pain. A teen also may be afraid of waking up during the operation or not waking up afterward. Anticipate these fears, then

emphasize that expressing fear, anxiety, and response to pain is quite normal (and OK) at any age, even adulthood. Correct any misconceptions about disfigurement or injury. And explain that anesthesia is very safe today and that patients do not wake up during operations but will certainly wake up afterward.

Encourage your teen to read up on the medical condition and share the information with the family. Reading and sharing information is an excellent coping mechanism. One further fear that affects kids of all ages is being seen naked and having their "private parts" touched. If the operation involves the genital or anal area, your child will cope better if you explain in advance that although it might be embarrassing, doctors and nurses will need to examine these private areas, especially to check if they're healing after the operation. Explain that doctors, nurses, and parents are the only exceptions to the rules about privacy.

Encourage your child's questions about the health problem and hospital experience, so that other fears and anxieties can be expressed. Take all questions seriously and answer them to the best of your ability. If you don't know an answer, tell your child that you'll find it out, and explain that the doctors and nurses are happy to answer questions, too (10, 16-18).

### ***Relieve Guilt***

Children often believe that their medical problem and operation are really punishments for "being bad." They might not say so, but they may feel guilty and believe that they've brought events on themselves. Explain that the medical problem is not the result of anything your child may have done or failed to do, and that the operation is not a punishment, but simply the way to "fix" the problem. On the other hand, if the medical problem was

caused by an accident that could have been avoided by obeying safety rules, make sure your child understands the reason for the rules and will follow them in the future (1, 4, 9).

### ***Explaining What Will Happen***

Find books, appropriate to your child's level of understanding, about what to expect at the hospital. Reading together and discussing the surgery will make the hospital seem less threatening. Discuss each idea and encourage your child's questions.

As you discuss the hospital and surgery, remember that in addition to your words, your nonverbal cues convey assurance: your tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body language send powerful messages. If you appear fearful, your child is likely to feel fearful regardless of the words you use.

### ***On the Day of Surgery***

When you arrive on the day of surgery, your young child can play with toys and books you bring from home or sit on your lap and be cuddled during the waiting time. You won't be allowed to stay in the operating room during the surgery, but afterward, you'll be escorted to the recovery room to be with your child as he or she awakens. Upon discharge, you'll be given instructions for further care at home and for a follow-up visit to the surgeon. During recovery, there may be times of discomfort for your child. So explain that even if this happens, your child will get better.

Distracting your child, whether with a new book or a visit from a relative or friend, also can make recovery more pleasant. Just make sure your child gets plenty of time to rest and recuperate (1, 6, 7, 11-18).

## **Conclusion**

Giving your child accurate information when preparing him/her for surgery is essential to their being calm before and after surgery. Explain the procedure to your child as accurately as possible, telling your child "I don't know but I will find out" if you do not know the answer to a question. It may be helpful to bring security objects from home, such as, stuffed animals, toys, pictures of loved ones, favorite blankets and pillows. Children better understand information that is simple and honest. Experts recommend different approaches for each age group.

### ***Infants (birth to 1 year)***

It will be very important to stay with your child as much as possible. This will allow you to maintain your child's daily routines of feeding, bathing, and playing. Keeping a normal schedule creates a secure environment for your infant. The hospital staff will explain any unfamiliar medical equipment to help you feel more comfortable in participating in your child's care.

### ***Toddlers (2 to 3 years)***

Toddlers do not understand the concept of time, so it is best to tell your child about surgery or hospitalization 1 to 2 days before.

Allow your child to choose a favorite stuffed animal, blanket, or toy to bring to the hospital to provide comfort. It is normal for toddlers to become fussy and have changes in their behaviors. A simple explanation of why he/she must go to the hospital is best for this age group. Reassure your child that you will be with him/her as much as you can.

### ***Preschoolers (4 to 5 years)***

Tell your child about surgery or hospitalization 3 to 4 days ahead of time. Prepare children in this age group by

explaining what they will see, hear, smell, and feel while in the hospital. Use simple, reassuring explanations without too many details. Avoid words like "shot" and "cut". It is normal for preschool children to have fantasies or misconceptions about the hospital experience. As a result of not knowing what to expect, they will often use their imagination. Often children think they did something wrong to cause the surgery. Please be reassuring to your child that surgery is not a punishment and it is no one's fault. Playing "hospital" or "doctor" before and after your hospital visit lets your child express feelings related to his/her hospital stay. Books about going to the hospital can be helpful. Provide reassurance that you will stay in the hospital as much as you can.

### ***School Age Children (6 to 12 years)***

Begin preparing your school age child for surgery or hospitalization 1 to 2 weeks ahead of time. School age children often worry about how the surgery will change the way they look. They need details about what they will see, hear, smell, and feel before, during, and after surgery. Talk about your child's fears and answer questions honestly. School age children often worry that they will wake up during the surgery. Explain to your child that there will be a doctor whose job is to make sure he/she stays asleep and does not feel anything during the surgery. A normal reaction for children is to become angry or quiet while in the hospital. It is important to give realistic choices to allow your child to feel a sense of control.

### ***Teenagers (13 years and older)***

Teenagers need plenty of time to prepare for surgery and hospitalization. Teens have a need for independence and privacy. Surgery or hospitalization may make your teen feel more dependent on others. It is important to include teens in all discussions and decisions about their care. Encourage your teen to make a list of

questions regarding the surgery and hospital stay. Be open and honest when answering questions. Teens need details about what they will see, hear, smell, and feel before, during, and after surgery. Your teen may be concerned about how his/her body will look after surgery and how it impacts daily activities with friends. Teens sometimes show their anger or frustration by being quiet or refusing medications. It is helpful to support your teen and give him/her realistic choices to provide a sense of control while in the hospital. Teens may want to inform their friends of their upcoming surgery or hospitalization. Teens often want to pack their suitcase which may include favorite pajamas, clothing, personal hygiene products, music, and movies (11, 13, 14, 17).

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