

Tips for Supporting Your Child of Any Age

From having to watch your child undergo medical treatments to trying to keep your family unit intact, caring for a child that is in the hospital can be a stressful and challenging time for a parent or caregiver. By being aware of specific stressors your child may potentially face while in the hospital, you can be better equipped to support and help your child cope throughout his/her hospitalization.

Tips for Children of All Ages

Honesty

Being honest with your child about their hospitalization is one of the most important components in helping your child cope throughout his/her time in the hospital. Be careful not to make promises regarding your child's plan of care that you cannot guarantee (ex. "I promise there will be no more pokes," or "We can go home as soon as they're done"). When promises have been broken or children have incorrect information or expectations, mistrust can develop between the child and his/her caregiver and medical staff. A patient's lack of trust in his or her family or medical staff can result in poor coping skills throughout the hospitalization and even after they are discharged.

Separation Anxiety

For children of all ages, their parent or caregiver is often their "safe person" that they have established a trusting relationship with. In a place that is a new environment with so many unknowns and many strangers walking in and out of their room, it is important for any child to have that trusting parent or caregiver with them as much as possible. When there is a lack of consistent parental or caregiver presence, children can develop separation anxiety and demonstrate regression or poor coping throughout their hospitalization.

Loss of Control

As children develop, they learn and desire to be in control of their environment and choices. However, when coming to the hospital, children can lose much if not all control over their environment and do not have many choices in their own plan of care. As parents or caregivers it is important to give your child control within appropriate limits and offer choices that they can actually make when available. For example, your child may not have a choice regarding the medicine he/she is taking, but they can sometimes have a choice whether to watch a movie or read a book after taking the medicine. Offering your child choices and giving him/her control that they can have will aid in your child's ability to cope throughout their hospitalization.

Siblings

Having a brother or sister in the hospital can at times be just as stressful for the sibling as it is for the hospitalized child. When a child goes to the hospital, siblings can have fears and misconceptions related to their brother or sister's hospitalization. It's important to use honest and age-appropriate explanations with the siblings such as, "Your brother/sister is in the hospital because their ___ (part of the body) is sick and the doctors and nurses have to give their body medicine to help them get better." Having a child's brother or sister visit them at the hospital can also help both the hospitalized child and the brother or sister cope throughout the hospitalization. If a sibling is visiting for the first time, a Child Life Specialist can help provide age-appropriate education regarding the patient's diagnosis as well as medical equipment involved in the child's treatment.

When siblings are unable to come to the hospital, it is still important to help them feel connected to their brother or sister and caregiver that are staying at the hospital. Some examples of ways to help a sibling feel connected include, the sibling making cards for the child or the child and caregiver making cards for the sibling at home or utilizing video chat or phone calls to help connect the sibling with his/her caregiver and the hospitalized child.

Age Specific Tips

Infants

Common hospitalization stressors:

- Separation from caregivers
- Lack of stimulation
- Change in normal routines
- Stranger anxiety
- Regression

What can you do to help your child?

- Have a consistent caregiver with your child as much as possible.
- Provide activities that promote normalization and development through mobiles, crib-soothers, and age-appropriate toys.
- Hold and cuddle your child to promote positive attachment.

Toddlers

Common hospitalization stressors:

- Separation from caregivers
- Misconception that hospitalization is a punishment
- Loss of control or routine
- Restricted movement or mobility
- Separation anxiety
- Regression

What can you do to help your child?

- Have a consistent caregiver with your child as much as possible.
- Establish a routine during the hospitalization so that your child knows what to expect.
- Offer choices when appropriate to encourage a sense of control.
- If your child is not in an isolation room, allow him/her to socialize with other children in the playroom or on the floor.
- Help normalize the hospital environment by allowing your child to play with toys or games that they might normally play with at home.

Preschoolers

Common Hospitalization Stressors:

- Loss of control
- Separation anxiety
- Anticipation of surgery, injections, or medical procedures
- Fear of pain
- Misconceptions of procedures or treatment

What can you do to help your child?

- Have a consistent caregiver with your child as much as possible.
- Give honest and age-appropriate explanations and expectations.
- Allow your child to become familiar with medical equipment he/she will encounter during the hospitalization through play (medical play).
- Help normalize the hospital environment by allowing your child to play with toys or games that they might normally play with at home.
- Offer choices when appropriate to encourage a sense of control.
- Help normalize the hospital environment by allowing your child to play with toys or games that they might normally play with at home.

School-Agers

Common Hospitalization Stressors:

- Separation from caregivers or friends at school
- Fear of pain and bodily injury
- Loss of control
- The unfamiliar
- Anesthesia
- Fear of death, illness, or disability

What can you do to help your child?

- Have a consistent caregiver with your child and if possible provide a means to connect with friends and classmates during the hospitalization (ex. Phone calls, letters, video chat).
- Show praise and affection
- Allow your child to explore medical equipment and provide truthful information about procedures and treatments he/she will experience.
- Allow your child to ask questions and answer them honestly to clear any misconceptions that he/she might have.

Adolescents

Common Hospitalization Stressors:

- Separation from peers
- Fear of pain and bodily injury
- Loss of identity and peer group status
- Body image and modesty
- Loss of control

What can you do to help your child?

- Encourage peer interactions to promote socialization.
- If possible provide a means to connect with friends and classmates during the hospitalization (ex. Phone calls, letters, video chat).
- Respect choices, independence, and privacy.
- Include your child in his/her plan of care.

- Provide truthful explanations and preparation prior to procedures and treatments.