

At the Hospital: Helping My Child Cope With Illness

WHAT PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS CAN DO

Feeling distressed or having strong emotional reactions is common when children are hospitalized. Even though it is your child who is ill, your whole family can feel overwhelmed or unprepared to cope. With time, understanding, and support, most children and families learn to adjust to the illness and cope with the hospital experience.

Things in the hospital that can be distressing or traumatic:

- Not knowing what is going to happen
- Changes in appearance – hair loss, weight gain/loss, surgical scars, etc.
- Being afraid of dying
- Being left alone or separated from siblings and pets
- Seeing other sick kids
- Being in pain or going through painful procedures
- Being exposed to equipment that looks or sounds scary
- Thinking that being in the hospital is a punishment

Common changes in children when distressed or hospitalized:

- Being cranky, having tantrums, talking back
- Bed-wetting or thumb-sucking in younger children
- Being easily upset or feeling worried or confused
- Problems with eating, sleeping, or having nightmares
- Wanting to be alone or clinging to parents or other adults
- Feeling left out, missing friends or family
- Worrying about looking or feeling different from others



Parents and caregivers can get distressed too:

- They often get upset at seeing their child in pain and can feel helpless or frustrated as a result
- They may not want to be away from their child and always feel “on guard”
- They may have a shorter fuse, trouble eating and sleeping, or feel overwhelmed by their child’s medical needs
- They may worry in private about their child dying, but not want to share their worries with anyone

In addition, many parents and caregivers are unsure about how to talk with their sick child (or with their other children at home) about their feelings, fears, and questions.

Special information for parents and caregivers of children: It is common for children and parents to feel overwhelmed or frustrated by the illness or the hospital experience at first. It may even take a few weeks for these reactions to settle down. If your child continues to be upset, if you have questions about how to help your child, or if you need to talk, there are staff members at the hospital whose job it is to help. In addition to the doctors and nurses, mental health professionals (including social workers, counselors, psychologists, and chaplains) are skilled at helping children and families cope. Also, read the other side of this handout for tips on helping your child cope while at the hospital.

Nine Ways You Can Help Your Child Cope While At The Hospital



- 1 You are the best person to comfort your child.** Although it may be difficult at times, try to be calm and reassuring. Give frequent praise and hugs if your child wants them. During tests and procedures, hold your child's hand and distract your child with books, toys, or games.
- 2 Be patient with your child.** Children's early reactions -including crying, whining, clinging, or acting out - are common and expected in small amounts. If they happen too often, it's okay to set rules and limits like you would at home. Work with the medical team to plan a daily routine so that things are more predictable and familiar.
- 3 Help your child understand what is happening.** Use simple words and examples he or she can understand. If your child needs a scary procedure, be honest about the fact that it may hurt, but also explain its purpose is to help fight the illness.
- 4 Encourage your child to share his or her feelings.** Help your child name his or her feelings such as being scared, angry, or sad. Sharing your feelings lets your child know that it's okay to share too. Remind your child that other children in the hospital have these feelings. Remember that younger children are often better at "talking about" their feelings through play, drawing, or storytelling.

- 5 Remember that children have active imaginations.** Children can tell when others are upset or not telling them things. Without the facts, they can easily misunderstand and "fill in the blanks" with their imagination. Sometimes, children mistakenly believe that they did something wrong to cause their illness. Ask questions to figure out what they know and what they imagine (ex: "What do you think is going to happen?") As realistically as possible, share the facts about the illness and let your child know that he or she has done nothing wrong to cause it.
- 6 Help your child think of the hospital staff as helpers.** Remind your child that the staff has a lot of practice helping other sick children. Encourage your child to ask questions to the doctors or nurses. When possible, allow your child to make choices to give him or her a feeling of control.
- 7 Young children are often more upset at being left alone.** While taking a break from the hospital can be helpful, have a family member or familiar adult stay with your child. Always tell your child when you are leaving, why, and when you will be back.
- 8 Take care of yourself.** If you are worried, upset, or not sleeping, it will be harder to help your child. Don't be afraid to ask friends or family for help. Talk about your worries with other adults, such as family, friends, a counselor, a member of the clergy, or one of the medical staff.
- 9 Remember that siblings and other children may also feel afraid, worried or jealous.** Siblings' needs are sometimes forgotten when a child is seriously ill. Set aside time to talk with your other children about what is happening, what to expect, and what they are feeling. Let them ask a lot of questions. Lean on close friends or family to provide "special time" and to help maintain daily routines.

