

Stress and the Hospitalized Child

Everyone has stress in his life. A little stress is normal, but too much is not good. Being in the hospital can overwhelm a child and his family. Besides being sick, there are all the new and strange things happening to your child, as well as all the new people. Here are some suggestions to help your child handle being in the hospital. These ideas should help decrease the stress for him and you.

Infant (0-12 months)

Things that may cause stress include:

- Being separated from parents
- Trust concerns
- Not as much time for stimulation or play
- Change of schedule, routine and environment

Ways to help your baby:

- Try to stay with your baby as much as possible. Being with you or another trusted loved one will help your baby feel more secure.
- Provide toys that are age appropriate for your baby. Balance quiet time with play time.

Toddler (1-2 years)

Things that may cause stress include:

- Being separated from parents
- Loss of independence
- Restricted movement
- Meeting new people

Ways to help your toddler:

- Be involved in your child's care. Talk to your child's nurse about feeding and bathing your child. Try to stay with your child or have another loved one there. This will help him feel more secure.
- Let your child help with treatments as much as he can. For example, hold the Band-Aid®, say "Owwie," or cuddle his toy. Ask a child life specialist about medical play.
- Maintain a normal schedule as much as possible.
- Help your child with appropriate toys and play while he has restricted movement.

Preschool age (3-5 years)

Things that may cause stress include:

- Being separated from parents
- Fear that his body will be changed or hurt
- Thinking about procedures or diagnosis in magical ways or as a punishment

Ways you can help:

- Try to stay with your child to help him talk about his fears. He needs you to cuddle and give him support. If you can not stay with your child, try to have another family member or friend who can. Let your child know when you will be coming back if you leave.
- If possible, you might want to be with your child during procedures to hold his hand and give support.
- Let him know what is happening to him in words he can understand. This way, he won't make up wrong information or stories in his mind. Be honest with him. Let him know something might hurt. However, it is better to tell him right before a procedure rather than hours or days before it happens.
- Work with the nurses and child life specialists to help him learn how to cope with being in the hospital. They have many ideas for distraction and play.
- Let him make choices that he can make. These might include his diet, when to take a bath, which pajamas to wear, and which medicine to take first. Be careful to give him choices that he can have.

School age (6-12 years)

Things that may cause stress include:

- Loss of control of his body
- Loss of independence
- Loss of ability to feel like he can master a skill

Ways you can help:

- Talk about things that will happen to him. Let him ask questions and answer them truthfully. Have the nurses or child life specialists explain procedures before they happen.
- Give him choices that he can make. This might include putting the IV in the right or left arm, which pajamas to wear, or picking out his food.
- Have him participate in his care.
- Work with the nurses and child life specialists to help him learn good coping skills. This may include relaxation, doing an art project, playing video games, etc.
- Let him know that he is doing a good job. Praise is very important.

Adolescent (12-19 years)

Things that may cause stress include:

- Loss of independence
- Concern about body image
- Lack of trust
- Threat to future competence

Ways to help decrease stress:

- Be sure to discuss everything that is happening with your child honestly.
- Build up the trust relationship between him and the medical care team.
- Let him be involved in his care and decisions about his health.
- Prepare him for any physical changes (incisions, scars, medical equipment, etc.).
- Let him know of any long term issues about his health care. How will this impact the rest of his life?

These are just some general guidelines to be used for a hospitalized child. Please let your child's doctor, nurse, or child life specialist know if you have any concern that your child is not coping with the hospitalization. There is always help available.