Going to the Hospital

Going to the hospital is hard on children and parents. No matter how good a parent you are, sometimes children get sick, have an accident, or can't get well at home. Preparing a child for what to expect will make the hospital stay easier. Here are tips to prepare your child:

Practice saying nice things about hospitals.

- Drive by a hospital and talk about what they do there.
  - Babies are born at a hospital.
  - They have nice nurses and doctors who help people feel better.
  - Kids who get hurt or sick sometimes go to the hospital to get better.
- Visit a relative in the hospital. (Be sure to check with the hospital about their visiting rules before going.)

Talk about the hospital before your child is to be admitted.

- See where he will stay.
- Tell him he can bring his favorite toy or stuffed animal, pajamas, slippers, toothbrush, clothes to wear home, and a picture of the family.
- Point out the good things: TV, eating in bed, play time.
- Timing is important. If you do this too far ahead, he may get anxious. (A good rule to follow for preparing your child is for every one year of age, prepare him one day ahead of time. For example, a five year old should be told five days in advance.)

Talk about what you do in the hospital.

- First, you sit in a waiting room while mom or dad fills out papers.
- You get a special bracelet to wear on your wrist that has your name on it.
- The nurse weighs you on a scale and checks your temperature and blood pressure.
- You may get different p.j’s or a nightgown to wear.
- The doctor checks all the parts of your body.
- You may have an x-ray, a picture of the inside of your body, or some other tests.
- You may need to take medicine, sometimes a pill or liquid, or it may be through a tiny straw that is usually placed in your hand to give your body drinks.
- You get to sleep in a special bed with railings. You may even get to eat in bed.
- There are playrooms and/or activity rooms. There is even a classroom for school.
- Sometimes doctors and nurses wear gloves and masks that make them look funny.
- Best of all — you get to go home when the doctor says you’re ready.
Pretend that you are going to the hospital.

- First, YOU be the doctor or nurse. Then, let your child be the doctor or nurse and you be the patient.
- Doctor kits make practicing easy and fun.

If your child is having surgery:

- He may attend a pre-op tour given by a Child Life Specialist.
- Children do well with surgery and anesthesia at all ages. Give a simple explanation of what will happen.
- Don’t go into a lot of detail. Use words he can understand.
- Focus on what your child will experience through his senses. (what he will see, feel, hear, taste, etc.)

Be positive in YOUR attitude.

- Your child will respond to how you are feeling about the upcoming hospital stay.
- If you can remain calm and appear confident, he will be more likely to be calm as well.
- Reassure your child by saying things like this: "People go to the hospital to feel better." "The doctor will fix something that is wrong."

Help your child TALK about his feelings.

- "Are you scared? It’s okay. I understand. Your teddy bear and I will be there for you."
- Be sure your child knows this is not punishment for being bad.

Stay with your child as much as you can.

- Your child needs you!
- Find someone else to stay with your other children at home.
- Take something to do for yourself — reading, knitting.
- Reassure your child that when you aren’t there, a nurse will be.
- Give lots of HUGS and LOVING.

Read helpful books with your child about hospitals:

- *Going to the Hospital* by Fred Rogers (New York: Putnam, 1988.)
- *Curious George Goes to the Hospital* by Margret and H.A. Rey (Houghton Mifflin, 1966.)