

Pediatric Psychology

Coping with Hospitalization

We have a psychology team available to support your family while in the hospital. Please let your medical team know if you would like a psychologist to stop by.

Many parents want to protect their children from information that can be scary, and are unsure about how to share medical information. Without clear explanations, kids may imagine the worst case scenario, which can lead to more worry. Helping your child understand what's going on in age appropriate language can make it easier to cope and manage stress during their hospital stay.



Helping Children Cope with Hospitalization

When speaking to your child in the hospital or their siblings at home, try to:

- Use words that your child knows and can understand easily
- Speak openly about your child's hospital stay
- Invite questions and answer honestly
- Follow your child's lead on the topics they are curious about

YOUNG CHILDREN

- Use short and simple words to describe their treatment and care team
- Focus on the who and why of the hospital stay

"You are in the hospital because your belly hurts. The nurses and doctors are here to help you feel better."

MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

- Use concrete language to explain information about their hospital stay and treatment
- Invite them to ask questions about their medical care and clear up areas of misunderstanding

"You're in the hospital because of your Crohn's Disease. The nurses and doctors will run some more tests to learn what medicine to give you."

TEENS

- Check their understanding of their condition and treatment. Keep teens informed about what to expect during their hospital stay
- Support shared-decision making and encourage them to ask questions to the medical team

"That was a lot of information from the team today. What are your thoughts about it?"

"Would you like to take the lead on asking questions while the doctors are here?"

It is normal for a hospitalization to cause stress for a child who is sick or injured. This stress can lead to changes in behaviors or emotions that are not usual for them, including being more tearful or dependent, difficulty managing emotions, and struggling with sleep, toileting, and eating habits for a period of time.

Fortunately, there are ways to help support your child during a hospital stay. Try these ideas:

1. Validate Feelings and Frustrations

Let your child know that their feelings make sense. This can have a calming effect on their emotions and behaviors. You can do this by saying things like:

- "I see you're feeling [scared]"
- "It makes sense you feel [bored], because [you don't get to do your normal routine]"

2. Reassure

Honest reassurance helps kids and teens understand what is happening to them in the hospital while providing comfort. Examples include:

- "It's really hard to sleep in the hospital, we'll try to make it as comfortable as possible."
- "The shot will be uncomfortable but only for a moment. I'll be right here holding your hand."

3. Play or Distract

Use play and distraction as a way to reduce stress and create moments for pleasurable activities. Try things like:

- Sharing favorite stories or memories, or looking at pictures or videos
- Listening to music
- Drawing or Arts and Crafts
- Playing 20 questions, eye spy, Would You Rather, or card games
- Bring reminders from home or other favorite activities
- Ask your child's providers to set up a visit with the Child Life Team. These child development specialists can help set up fun activities in the hospital.
- Complete school assignments. Teachers are available to meet with your child to support them in completing missed work.

4. Keep Connections Strong

When possible, find opportunities for your child to connect with family or close friends. Find a few minutes for:

- Phone and video calls
- Sharing notes, videos, or drawings
- Having visitors in the hospital

5. Use Relaxation Skills

- Ask kids to take a deep breath in as you count to 3, then slowly blow out as you count to 4
- Use pleasant and calming sensations:
 - Put a cool paper towel on their head or neck
 - Smell a favorite lotion
 - Put on cozy socks

6. Create Helpful Thoughts

Uncomfortable emotions can be hard to control, and often lead to spirals of overly negative thinking. When this happens, guide your child to focus on facts they know are true and helpful. Look at these examples of how you can help shift negative thoughts into ones that may be more helpful:

- This is going to hurt so much — This may hurt, but it will be over soon.
- I'm missing out on so much — It's true I can't do everything everybody else is, but getting help is really important.

7. Stick to a Routine as Much as Possible

This can be hard in the hospital when medical care leads to changes in routine. When you can, creating a general routine or planning to do certain activities each day can help kids feel more grounded and stable.

8. Offer Choices Where You Can

Being in the hospital means that kids and teens have much less control and privacy around their body, space, and personal information. Find moments for your child to have a say by offering small choices when you can. For younger children, that might be letting them pick what color bandage they want or what movie to watch. Older teens may benefit from parents stepping out when they change, having a private moment with the team, or getting to choose what information to share with friends and family.

Helping Siblings Cope with Hospitalization

When a child is hospitalized, it adds stress to the entire family system and can have an impact on siblings at home. This stress can lead to changes in behaviors or emotions that are not usual for them. This might include difficulty managing emotions, feeling jealous or resentful, having increased worry, or struggling with things like sleep, eating, or going to school.

Here are some ways to help support siblings of children who are in the hospital:

1. Validate Feelings and Frustrations

Letting your child know that their feelings make sense can have a calming effect on their emotions and behaviors. You can do this by saying things like:

- "It must be really [frustrating] that [I am not home much right now.]"
- "Of course you're [worried about your brother], because [you love him so much]"

2. Reassure

Honest reassurance helps kids and teens understand what is happening in the hospital while providing comfort. Examples include:

- "We'll let you know as soon as we hear about your sibling's test results."
- "Let's talk about the plan for who will be home with you each night this week."

3. Keep Sibling Connection Strong

When possible, find opportunities for siblings to check-in or connect with each other through:

- Phone/Video Calls
- Making notes, videos, or drawings for each other
- Having visits in the hospital

4. Guide Through Relaxation Skills to Help Calm Our Bodies and Minds

- Ask kids to take a deep breath in as you count to 3, then slowly blow out as you count to 4
- Use pleasant and calming sensations:
 - Put a cool paper towel on their head or neck
 - Smell a favorite lotion
 - Put on cozy socks



5. Create Helpful Thoughts

Uncomfortable emotions can be hard to control, and often lead to spirals of overly negative thinking. When this happens, guide your child to focus on facts they know are true and helpful.

- "I never get enough time with my mom/dad" → **It's really hard not seeing my parents as much, but I know I would want them with me if I was in the hospital.**
- "It's not fair that nobody is home to take me to my friends house tonight" → **Missing out is not fun, but I know it is only temporary.**

6. Stick to a Routine as Much as Possible

Routines can be hard when a sibling is in the hospital, but creating a daily schedule can help kids feel more grounded and stable. Regular mealtimes, support with homework, and bedtime can help kids manage emotions and cope with stress. Look to friends and family to help fill gaps in the schedule with activities like going to a park or seeing a movie.



7. Keep Important People in the Loop

This can be hard in the hospital when medical care leads to changes in routine. When you can, creating a general routine, planning for certain activities each day, keeping up with household expectations and tasks (like respectful language or 20 minutes of reading) can help kids feel more grounded and stable. It can also help make it easier to transition back home once the hospital stay is over.

8. Find Moments for Special One-on-One Time

In the midst of hospitalization, it can be hard to find quiet moments with children who are at home. If possible, try to find a few minutes of time each day to connect, have a phone call, or play a short game that's just between you and each of your children.

Tools for Caregiver Well Being

Having a child in the hospital can be intensely stressful for caregivers. Parents often set aside their own needs, leaving them exhausted, overwhelmed, and alone. It is important to know that it is normal and okay for parents to need their own care and support.

Finding ways to look after your own well being doesn't have to take much time and by taking care of yourself you are better able to care for your child. Begin with prioritizing rest and physical needs, which can help you feel more like yourself, regain some energy, and cope during your child's hospitalization. For example:

- Take short breaks from your child's bedside each day. While it may seem impossible to leave your child's side even for a moment, you can talk with your child's nurse or care team members to see if there is anybody who can be with your child while you step out.
- Look for opportunities to meet your basic needs like eating, sleeping, and showering, even if it's just for a quick snack or short nap.

Picking a few coping strategies is also useful in managing stress. Writing down a list of helpful ideas can make it easier to remember and use. If you have a hard time knowing where to start, write down one idea for each of the following:

1. A helpful thought or mantra that keeps you grounded or calm

Example: One day at a time, one day at a time, one day at a time.

Fill in:

2. An activity that soothes your body

Examples: Deep breathing, drinking a cup of hot tea, putting a cold cloth on your forehead, getting fresh air, going for a walk, stretching, finding a calm and quiet space, journal or doodle

Fill in:

3. One activity you have used to cope with stress in the past

Examples: Calling a friend, listening to music, meditation or prayer, reading, playing a word game, seeking religious support, speaking with a mental health clinician (ask your child's care team if you can speak to somebody for your own support)

Fill in:

4. Identify areas where you can cut yourself some slack

Examples: Respond to texts/emails at your own pace (or not at all), pick a family member to send health updates you want shared, choose meal options that are easy, ask co-workers or neighbors to help cover some of your responsibilities

Fill in: