

Helping your Child Cope with Painful Medical Procedures

All children will undergo some painful medical procedures when they are growing up, such as having their blood taken or immunisations. If a child has a medical condition, they may need to undergo further tests or treatments which may be painful. Often children and their families find these procedures stressful - even the thought of having a medical procedure can be upsetting.

When children are in a stressful situation they look to their parents for clues on how to make sense of what is happening to them and how they should behave. This means that as a parent you can make a real difference in how your child understands and copes with medical procedures and stressful situations. Research studies, across the world, have found that simple things that parents say and do can affect how children react to pain.

What you can do

Before the procedure:

Remain calm and control any anxiety you may feel. Your child may be frightened and you need to remain calm for them. Your child needs to see that you are in control. Be aware of your facial expression and non-verbal behaviour. If you gasp, flinch, or cringe, your child may become more frightened. Your child will draw strength from your calm reaction and will be better able to cope with their pain. If you feel yourself getting tense or anxious, breathe slowly and deeply and relax your jaw and posture.

Take time to explain to your child, in a way that they can understand, why they need to have the procedure. Use simple language appropriate for their age. Let them know that you will be there to help them throughout the procedure, and that the doctors and nurses are there to help them too.

Ask your child whether they have any questions about the procedure – it is important that they are given time to have their questions answered as not knowing or having the wrong idea about what will happen can make the pain of the procedure feel worse.

Answer your child's questions honestly – if a procedure is likely to hurt, tell them that it may hurt, but be sure to emphasize all the things that will be done to help them.

If possible, **offer your child some control.** For example, let your child choose which arm to use for a blood test or immunisation. Sometimes, however, children can become overwhelmed if they are given too much control and this may increase their anxiety.

Show confidence in your child's ability to cope with the situation – let them know that you think they will cope well.

Nothing makes a greater difference in a child's self-esteem and behaviour than a parent that believes in them and their ability to cope with difficult situations.

During the procedure:

Make physical contact with your child. For example cuddling, touching or letting them squeeze your hand can give them comfort. It is usually best if you don't help to restrain your child during the procedure.

Encourage your child to cooperate with healthcare staff, but do realise this may be difficult for them to do.

Control the amount and frequency of reassurance that you give your child. If you give them too much, it may give them the message that something "serious" is going on and this can worry them and interfere with their use of good coping strategies.

Be aware of your own negative thoughts and mental images and replace them with positive ones. It may help to say to yourself: "Everything will be OK", "I am strong. I can cope with the situation."

Respect and respond to your child's coping style. Some children like to be distracted during a painful procedure with toys, books, or by using their imagination. Other children, usually older, may like to pay close attention to what is going on when the healthcare staff are performing the procedure.

Encourage your child to take deep, slow breaths and "blow the pain away." This will help them to relax. Ask them to imagine that they are getting rid of any pain and fear they may be feeling every time they breathe out.

Use your child's imagination. Children like to use their imagination and this can help them cope with pain. You can

teach your child how to relax by encouraging them to imagine that they are in a favourite place (e.g. their grandmother's house) or taking part in a favourite activity (e.g. playing football). Ask them to go into detail and describe out loud what they are imagining (colours, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings). You can encourage their involvement in imagination by adding details to their stories, asking questions and making humorous comments (e.g. "Why is the referee wearing his swimming shorts!!").

If at any point during a procedure you feel that you are being overwhelmed by worry, just **ask for help** and take a step back. You can come back to helping your child when you feel you can.

After the procedure:

Praise your child for getting through the procedure. Tell them how proud you are of how well they coped. Younger children like simple rewards such as badges or stickers.

Get back to a normal routine soon after the procedure and the visit to the Hospital. Procedures are a part of normal childhood - they need not be the focus.

If your child dwells on the procedure, they can usually be helped by talking about it with you or through play. If your child has to cope with repeated medical procedures and you feel that they need additional support, or if you feel you need support, talk with your child's healthcare team.

Finally, always remain positive and optimistic! We know that children, and also parents, are remarkably resilient in coping with difficult events

Want to know more?

Lioffi C. (2002). Procedure-related cancer pain in children. Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford.
www.gosh.nhs.uk/cpap/resources/links.html
 WellChild Helpline: Tel 0845 122 86 36,
 Email: helpline@wellchild.org.uk, Text: 0778 147 2599
www.childrenshealth.org.uk

"When your child is in pain." is produced by the WellChild Pain Research Centre at the Institute of Child Health, University College London and Great Ormond Street Hospital (www.wprc.ucl.ac.uk). All rights reserved.