

Helping your child cope with hospital: information for families

Sometimes we might feel scared about coming into hospital, and primary school-age children are no different – it disrupts their usual routine, and they may be surrounded by people they don't know. Some children may find the experience of going into hospital overwhelming.

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) aims to give you a few ideas about issues you might be facing and suggestions for how you could deal with them. Some of the ideas come from our Play and Patient Experience teams, who between them have many years of experience working with children, young people and families in hospital. If you have any ideas of your own or that have worked for you, please contact us to tell us about them.

Talk to your child

Time passes at different rates when you are a child so it can be difficult to know when to tell them they are going to hospital. As a rough guide, telling younger children about the visit a day or two in advance might be a good idea. Older children will want more time to get ready so tell them a week or so beforehand.

No question or concern is unimportant – their priorities may be completely different to yours. If you don't know the answer, tell them you will find out and let them know.

Reassure your child about what to expect at GOSH, there are lots of people at the hospital that will help and support.

Having open and honest conversations about coming hospital is really important, as much as possible.

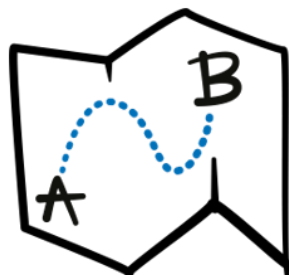
Visit our website for a 'virtual tour' and information about each ward.

Identifying worries

When your child knows they are going to hospital, try to find out if there are particular things concerning them.

Some children may worry about sharing a room with someone they don't know – remember that most of our rooms are for one person only, plus a parent. If they do have to share a bay, we will ask them if they prefer to share with someone their own age or gender, and do our best to organise this if possible.

Your child might be worried about being away from you for any length of time. We encourage one parent to stay with their child in hospital (both parents if the child is in intensive care) so tell them



that you will be with them, sleeping in the same room.

If you cannot stay all the time or when you are having a break from the ward, tell your child what time you will be back and try not to be late. If you do get delayed, call the ward so they can tell your child. Make sure they know who is there for them if you have to be away at any point or any period of time.

Keep to a routine

Try to keep to usual routines as much as possible – for instance, mealtimes and bedtimes. While it can be tempting to relax usual routines with your child, they will probably prefer to stick to what they know as if feels safe.

Understanding our bodies

It can also help to understand the location and function of different parts of the body. Basic anatomy books for children and young people are useful. There are lots of books about particular common health conditions too, such as asthma or eczema.

Use toys to ‘play hospital’

It can help your child understand what is going to happen if their favourite teddy or doll also has the same things done. You could pretend to examine the toy, put on a plaster, take their temperature or listen to their heart. There are ‘play hospital kits’ available containing toy stethoscopes and syringes – these can be inexpensive or see if you could borrow one from a friend.

Stories and television

There are lots of books available that are either factual information about hospitals or story books about having an operation or visiting the dentist. Have a look at some of the suggestions at the end of this information sheet or talk to the Children’s Librarian at your local public library.

Many children’s television channels have programmes about our bodies, health and hospitals. Again, see our suggestions at the end of this information sheet. Some hospitals also have short video films available on their websites or on a YouTube™ channel – search YouTube™ for the GOSH channel.

Practice makes perfect

If you know that your child is going to have a particular test or procedure in hospital, it can help to practise at home first through play.

Many procedures need your child to stay very still for a short time – you could play ‘sleeping lions’ or ‘statues’ to practise, gradually increasing the amount of time your child can be still.

School and nursery

Your child may miss their friends while they are in hospital so it is good to keep in touch if possible. Talk to your child’s teacher about having a video call with the class or perhaps your child could send a short film saying hello. This could be important if your child’s appearance has changed while they have been in hospital, for instance if they have a new scar or have lost some hair.

If your child is due to have any tests or exams, talk to the Hospital School at GOSH. They can contact your child’s school, either to discuss going back once they have left hospital or arrange for work to be transferred if they are likely to be with us for a while.

Long-term patients (or those who come to GOSH regularly) will have education and play support. The school follows the national curriculum but also has regular visitors to help with specific topics.



After a hospital stay

When you are back home after a hospital stay, routine will be a little jumbled and it may take some time for everyone to settle.

Some children may take a little longer to settle, and they may have an interruption in their development. This is also to be expected and should improve with time. If you are concerned, ask your family doctor (GP) for advice or contact one of the organisations at the end of this information sheet.

Helping your other children cope

Any change to everyday routines can be unsettling – if a parent and brother or sister is away from home from any length of time, this is bound to have an effect on your other children. We have produced an information sheet full of suggestions to help your other children cope when their brother or sister is ill or has additional needs – ask for a copy or read it on our website.

Further information and support

At GOSH, **psychosocial teams** are groups of highly trained professionals, including social workers, family support workers, family therapy and clinical psychologists, with expertise in caring for children, young people and families in hospital. All wards and departments can get in touch with the psychosocial service.

The **Patient Advice and Liaison Service (Pals)** team can give you confidential advice and support about any issues that crop up while you are visiting or staying at GOSH. Drop into the office in main reception, call them on 020 7829 7862 or email pals@gosh.nhs.uk.

The **Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care** team offer spiritual, religious and pastoral care to staff, children, young people and families of all faiths or none. They visit the wards regularly and also provide a 24-hour on-call service every day of the year. Visit the Chaplaincy Office by St Christopher's Chapel, ask a member of the ward team to contact them or email chaplaincy@gosh.nhs.uk.

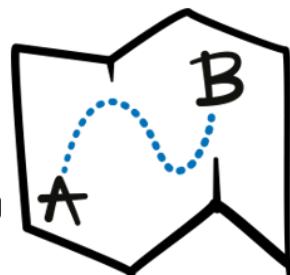
Support organisations for specific conditions can be very helpful and the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (Pals) at GOSH can put you in touch with a relevant organisation. The umbrella organisation Contact (previously called Contact a Family) produces helpful information sheets. You can telephone them on 0808 808 3555 or visit their website at www.contact.org.uk.

What? Why? Children in hospital is a Scottish organisation providing videos about health and hospital for children. Visit their website at www.whatwhychildreninhospital.org.uk

Books

This is just a selection of children's books for various ages – see if you can borrow them from your local Public Library. We are not recommending these books specifically by listing them here – other books may be available.

- Paddington goes to hospital by Michael Bond – ISBN 0 008 149 240
- The midnight gang by David Walliams – ISBN 0 062 561 065
- My amazing body machine: a colourful visual guide to how your body works by Robert Winston – ISBN 0241283809



- Operation ouch!: the humanual by Ben Elcomb, Dr Chris van Tulleken, Dr Xand van Tulleken – ISBN 0 141 375 973

The CBeebies® channel from the BBC produces couple of series about everyday life, including health and hospitals – watch the episodes together so you can answer any questions.

- Topsy and Tim - www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/topsy-and-tim
- Get Well Soon with Dr Ranj - www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/get-well-soon

The CBBC™ channel for older children also has a series you might find helpful.

- Operation Ouch! With Dr Chris, Dr Xand and Dr Ronx - www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/shows/operation-ouch

