

# Helping your teenager cope with hospital: information for families

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**It is normal for anyone (at any age) to feel apprehensive about coming into hospital. Teenagers already face the everyday challenges of growing older, balancing increasing amounts of schoolwork and enjoying downtime with their friends. Being unwell, needing treatment or spending any amount of time in hospital can be disruptive for young people and their families in addition to these usual demands.**

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. All the ideas come from our play team, 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 particular tips or methods that have worked for you, please contact us to tell us about them.

## Talking with your teen

Teenagers may find it hard to express their worries or feelings about a hospital appointment or admission. This may be because they have had a previous hospital experience that was difficult or stressful. It may be because they have little or no previous experiences of hospital and are unsure of what to expect.

They may also have very limited experience of speaking to other people about their body, how it feels to be unwell or complex thoughts and feelings around hospital care and treatment. They will need your help – and the help of hospital staff – to manage their thoughts, feelings and conversations around these things.

The most important thing parents and carers can do when preparing for a hospital appointment or admission is to keep communication open with your teenager. Keep them informed of the dates

and times of appointments and any plans for hospital stays or treatment.

Reassure them that no question or concern is silly, or unimportant – their priorities may be completely different to yours. Encourage them to talk to you about any concerns. They may find it easier to write down their questions or thoughts. It may even be easier to have some conversations with them using text or email, even if this feels strange at the start.

Above anything else, teenagers need reassurance and to know that they are not facing their illness or hospital treatment alone. If you don't know the answer, tell them you will do your best to find out and let them know. They may be relieved that you have worries or feel uncertain about things, too.

## Dealing with feelings

Everyone deals with the stresses of illness and hospital in a different way. Your child may focus or



worry about something completely different to you or may find ways to cope that are unique to them.

Talking about their experiences can be a great release for teens. They may prefer to speak to someone outside the family. If this is helpful, don't be offended – it is perfectly normal for teenagers to keep some stuff private from their parents. There are lots of people at GOSH who can help. See the 'Further Information' section at the end of this sheet for more ideas.

## Keeping them involved

At GOSH, we are committed to involving teenagers in their healthcare and decisions about treatment or care that will affect them. This can be challenging at times, but it is important to help young people to feel they have some control over a very important part of their life.

Teenagers are given the opportunity to sign their own consent form to give their permission for operations or procedures at GOSH, although you may need to sign it too if your teenager is under 18 years old.

As your teenager grows older, it is important to offer them the opportunity to talk to the doctor or nurse alone. This may help them to feel more in control of their hospital experiences. It can also help them to feel prepared for the transition from children's to adolescent or adult services.

Talk to them about any up-coming appointments, how their health and treatment has been and any issues you would both like to talk about with their doctor or nurse. Encourage them to ask their own questions – writing a list often helps.

Some teenagers struggle to cope with their illness and treatment. This can be for many reasons. They may feel overwhelmed by a new diagnosis or the effects of illness on their life. They may feel angry and frustrated by the demands of managing a chronic condition. They may have lots of questions about how these things will affect the

decisions they are starting to think about regarding studying or living independently.

Teenagers may fear feeling or looking different to their friends in any way. Their illness and treatment may bring more risks of feeling different to other people. They may also have difficulties with ongoing treatment plans, remembering what to do at what times or coping with side effects of medication. These can all be difficult to deal with and hard to talk about. Parents may not know what to do to support their children in the best possible way. What teenagers need most is open communication, reassurance and support.

## Practical matters for coming into hospital

All inpatient wards at GOSH are mixed ages and genders. Your teenager may worry that they will be surrounded by babies and toddlers when they are in hospital. Most of our rooms are for one person only, plus a parent. If they do have to share a bay, we will ask about their preferences around sharing with others their own age or gender, and we will do our best to accommodate this if possible.

Privacy is increasingly important to teenagers as they grow older. Most of our single rooms have blinds for privacy although these should only be closed when getting dressed or having a procedure. The nursing team will still need to be able to see into rooms for the rest of the time. With the help of our play team, teenagers could make a sign for their door asking staff to knock and wait for a reply before entering, or letting staff know what things are important to them during their stay. Setting some reasonable boundaries will help them to feel more involved in their care.

If your daughter is having periods, she may worry about having enough towels or tampons when in hospital. She can bring a supply with her - and there are shops in the local area if more are needed. Please reassure her that most wards have a small supply for emergencies.



## Making use of technology

Some teenagers may worry about what they will miss while being in hospital. Staying in touch with friends, family and the outside world is very important. Technology means it is much easier to keep in touch than ever before. Video calling can be a great way to keep a connection between your sick child, their friends and any family members at home – they can even keep an eye on their pet if they have one! At GOSH, you can use our free Wi-Fi to save data charges on your mobile phone or laptop.

You may also want to sign up for MyGOSH. This application gives patients access to certain parts of their medical records, such as appointment and admission details and test results. Teens and their parents can access MyGOSH from mobile devices. When your child is 16 years old, we will ask them whether they want anyone else, including parents, to have access to their MyGOSH account.

In preparation for a hospital stay, teenagers may want to visit the GOSH website for a 'virtual tour' and information about each ward.

## School and work

If your teenager is facing exams in the next year or two and is worried about missing schoolwork, the hospital school at GOSH can help. They will

make contact with your child's school and make sure that he or she does not miss out on any work while they are in hospital. Some teenagers even find that they are ahead of the class when they return!

As they grow older, your teenager may want to explore going to university or starting work. They may have concerns about how their illness or treatment could affect which jobs they can do. We hold regular 'careers fairs' at GOSH where representatives from lots of organisations come in to meet young people, talk to them about potential careers and help them get ready for working life. Look out for posters about the next one and encourage them to come along.

## Transferring to adolescent or adult services

We encourage and support young people to become as independent as they can with their own healthcare. Once children have started secondary school, the teams at GOSH believe this is a good time to think about the skills and knowledge they will need to be active participants in decisions about their own healthcare. The 'Growing Up, Gaining Independence' programme at GOSH is a structured programme to help teenagers become more independent. Ask your nurse specialist or consultant for more details.

## 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.

Our Adolescent Nurse Specialist works with teenagers and their families to help them cope with growing older and transferring to adolescent or adult services. Call them on 020 7405 9200 extension 1319.

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](mailto: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 [GOSH.Chaplaincy@gosh.nhs.uk](mailto:GOSH.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](http://www.contact.org.uk).

