

FACTSHEET

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Children's painful procedures and operations:

How can parents help?

Sometimes medical procedures can be threatening and/or painful for children and young people. Hospital staff will always try to reduce your child's anxiety and pain to make medical procedures as stress free as possible.

As a parent, you know your child best so you can greatly assist in helping your child to cope with the procedure or surgery.

Things you can do

- Talk to your child's doctor about the procedure/operation. Be sure to ask any questions that you or your child may have.
- Provide your child with simple and honest information. A good guide is to answer the five W's ... Who, What, Where, When, Why? (e.g. Dr x will be doing y, in the Outpatients Department tomorrow afternoon to fix your arm).
- Provide this explanation wherever possible before the day of the procedure – taking into account your child's temperament and developmental age.
- Answer any questions that your child may have. If you don't know the answer to your child's questions try to find out (e.g. tell them that you don't know, but together you will ask the doctor or nurse).
- It is usually helpful to bring your child's comfort toys or items which help them relax. For example a teddy, dummy, blanket, book, a phone with a favourite game. These familiar items are comforting.
- It is very helpful for a child to have a parent present during a painful procedure and/or when your child

wakes up after surgery. If you feel unable to be present, think about asking another adult who your child is comfortable with to be present.

- Research has shown that distraction is helpful in reducing pain and anxiety during procedures. Distraction involves helping your child to focus on things other than the medical procedure; for example, blowing bubbles, looking at picture books, watching a DVD, playing an app or playing with other favourite toys, or singing familiar or silly songs.
- Use of relaxation strategies can also be very helpful but it is important that they are practiced beforehand at home. There are many ways to relax. Some of these include:
 - slow breathing techniques
 - guided imagery: this may involve your child picturing him/herself in a favourite place and imagining what he/she can see, hear, feel, taste and smell
 - muscle relaxation techniques: starting to relax body parts starting from the toes and working slowly up to the head
 - listening to music (if your child needs to be still, keep the music relaxed and slow)

Praise the child for any attempts at using helpful coping strategies. For example:

- "you used your listening ears"
- "you are doing great slow deep breathing ..."
- "you used your words to tell us..."
- "what a great job you're doing spotting all of the stars"
- "you kept your arm still"
- "I liked the way you blew and popped the bubbles"

If your child cries, let him or her know that it is OK to feel upset. Your child does not need to be brave

It can be helpful to give your child some control over what is happening (e.g. whether to sit on the bed or a parent's lap for the procedure, what distraction to use during the procedure, who will talk to them during the procedure). These choices need to be discussed with the nurse and/or doctor first as they need to be real choices that can be followed through with.

For children over three it can also be helpful to provide them with a job during the procedure so they can focus on what they need to do – rather than what they can't do eg. Your job during the blood test is to keep your arm still.

It is good to talk with your child about the procedure afterwards; especially about what your child did that helped him/her cope. Some children may want to draw a picture about the experience. This helps your child better understand what happened and may make it easier if more procedures are needed in the future.

Remember:

- As a parent you know your child best, and can therefore greatly assist staff in helping your child cope with the procedure or surgery.
- Be honest and calm when informing your child about the procedure and answering his/her questions.
- Decide on which coping strategies you and your child think would be most helpful.

It is generally helpful for a child to have a parent present during a painful procedure and/or when your child wakes up after surgery. If you feel unable to be present think about arranging for another person your child is comfortable with to be present.

More information on helping children cope with painful procedures is available from the following web-site: <http://pediatric-pain.ca/content/Families>

If your child requires frequent procedures, and experiences anxiety you can contact the Child Life Departments at:

- Sydney Children's Hospital
- The Children's Hospital at Westmead or
- John Hunter Children's Hospital