your child’s visit to...
the children’s hospital at Westmead
Preparing yourself and your child for a hospital visit

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Helping your child during a hospital stay

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A hospital visit or stay may be quite overwhelming for your child. There are a number of ways in which you can help make the experience less daunting.

To help prepare yourself and your child for a visit or stay at our hospital some important information is presented under the following topic areas:

• Preparing yourself and your child for a hospital visit
• Helping your child during a hospital stay
• What you can do to help siblings cope with their brother/sister’s hospital stay
• Coming home from a hospital visit

We hope that you find this a useful reference. Remember that preparation, support and love will help your child face new situations with confidence.

Preparing yourself and your child for a hospital visit

Where to obtain information

To help prepare your child, you have to first prepare yourself by learning as much as you can about your child's condition and treatment as well as our hospital setting and available services. Here is how you may find and access some of this information:

• Talk to your health care professionals about your child’s illness or condition, any tests he may require and any drug or surgical treatments available.

• Visit our hospital website at www.chw.edu.au to find out about services available to you whilst you are at our hospital.

• Read the booklet, titled 'A Handbook for Families', produced by The Children's Hospital at Westmead. This booklet provides you with background information and details of services available to you and your family. The booklet may be viewed online at www.chw.edu.au/parents/stay or a copy obtained by calling our Service Improvement Unit on (02) 9845 3442 or by e-mailing siusiu@chw.edu.au

• Hospital tours are regularly conducted to show children, booked for surgery, and their parents what our hospital is like. This often eases anxiety and stress for the whole family. If you are booked in for surgery and would like a tour of our hospital for you and your child, prior to admission, you may organise this through our Pre-Admission Clinic Coordinator during your visit or by calling (02) 9845 2530. For all other admissions, a tour may be arranged by contacting our Tour Coordinator on (02) 9845 3579.

• View our fact sheets on a range of illnesses, health conditions, tests and medical procedures at www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets
• Contact Kids Health on (02) 9845 3585 or by e-mailing kidsh@chw.edu.au to obtain any further health information. You may also visit Kids Health (located on level two of the Hospital, behind the Chemist), to borrow or purchase books on health topics.

When to tell your child about coming to hospital

If a hospital stay is planned, you will need to talk to your child about the stay. How far in advance you talk to him depends on his age and your knowledge of how he has handled difficult situations in the past.

The following is only a guide which should be adjusted if your child is developmentally younger or older than the given age:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of child</th>
<th>When to tell your child</th>
<th>Why</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toddler</td>
<td>Just prior to coming to hospital</td>
<td>He may not yet understand the concept of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school aged child</td>
<td>One to two days prior</td>
<td>He may enjoy using imagination to play at being in hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School aged child</td>
<td>One week prior</td>
<td>In addition to imagination play, he may understand more and develop some coping strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescents (Older adolescents should be involved with the health professionals and aware of their condition and admission, along with parents)</td>
<td>Several weeks prior</td>
<td>He may need to imagine what it would be like to be in hospital and think of ways in which to cope with the situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What to tell your child about coming to hospital

When you talk to your child about his hospital visit, make sure you are in a quiet environment where he is not distracted. Some children may prefer the information in small segments, allowing time in between to process all that he has heard.

• When you do talk to your child, use a calm and relaxed tone and choose simple words to describe his illness or condition, the need for a hospital visit and the potential need for an operation or procedure. Use familiar words, rather than medical terms, to describe.

• As you continue to explain, stop and check to make sure your child understands what you are saying.

• Make sure your child comprehends that the illness or condition is not his fault and is certainly not a punishment for something he has done. Explain to your child that other children of the same age do experience the same illness and/or need the same medical procedure as him.

• Let your child know that it is alright to express feelings of fear, anger or sadness. Be there to reassure and comfort him using ‘gentle’ words.

• Encourage your child to ask questions. Be prepared for questions like, ‘Will my operation hurt?’ or ‘Am I going to die?’

• Answer your child’s questions, including those about pain, as truthfully as you can. If you do not have the answer to a question, ask a member of the health care team for help.

• If you know that your child will require sedation during a procedure, explain to him how anaesthesia works and that he will wake up when the doctor has completed the procedure. Describe anaesthesia as ‘medicine that helps you fall asleep for a little bit’ instead of ‘medicine to put you to sleep’ as he may associate ‘put to sleep’ with ‘putting down a pet’. Unless asked, you do not need to address details about what will happen under sedation.

• You may want to talk to your child about any possible changes to his appearance as a result of treatment, such as a scar, so that he has time to accept and be prepared for the change. However, discussion regarding possible complications may be avoided, unless asked by your child.

Other activities to help prepare your child for hospital

• Read to your child or have your child read a book which prepares him for hospital. There are a number of books written on the topic to suit the various age groups. The following titles are a sample of books in the area:
  - Lachlan goes to Hospital by The Children’s Hospital at Westmead
  - Why am I going to Hospital by C Ciliotta and C Livingston
  - When I go to Hospital by M Dugan
  - Harry goes to Hospital by D Radford

• Play “hospital” with your child. This helps children, especially the younger ones, become familiar with the hospital settings. This may also help your child better communicate feelings and his level of understanding.

• Ask your child to help you pack his bag for hospital. Encourage him to include a favourite toy or cosy pyjamas. Page 22 of ‘A Handbook for Families’ provides a list of suggested items to bring for a hospital stay.
Helping your child during a hospital stay

Things that may help you cope with your child’s hospital stay

- In order to give your child your support, you need to look after yourself. Get as much sleep as possible and be sure to have regular meals so that you are not run down. Be sure to take some time for yourself each day so that you may re-energise.

- Close family and friends often offer to help. Make a list of tasks they could help with which will allow you more time with your child in hospital.

- When relatives and friends call to visit your child, ask them to space their visits so that your child has a spread of visitors. Some visits may also offer you an opportunity to be away from your child’s hospital bed to have a break.

- At times when you would like to have a break from the ward area, you may visit The Parents and Carers Resource Centre located on level two of the Hospital, opposite Kids Health. The Resource Centre is a quiet place where you can relax and take ‘time out’ from the ward area, have a cup of tea or coffee and find out more about services offered to families.

- If you need to be away from the Hospital and would like to organise someone to stay with your child, ask your Nurse Unit Manager about volunteers or ‘ward grannies’ providing this care for your child.

- If you do not understand medical terminology used by health professionals in relation to the care of your child, do not hesitate to ask for clarification. An interpreter service is also available at the Hospital, if needed.

What you can do to help your child cope with his hospital stay

- Be there for your child and stay with him overnight as often as you can, especially if your child is young.

- When you leave your child’s side, tell him where you are going and when you will be returning. Tell your child who will look after him in your absence and, if possible, phone your child in his room while you are away.

- Where possible, help your child keep to a routine. Observe rules similar to home (including limits on behaviour), allowing for some variation to accommodate for his circumstance.

- Help your child communicate with members of the health care team. Inform staff of your child’s nickname, likes, dislikes and routines as this will help staff in providing better care for him.

- Organise visits and phone calls from family and friends, keeping in mind the visiting hours of 10am to 12pm and 2pm to 7pm.

- There are many experiences and activities at our hospital that can support your child during his hospital stay. Encourage your child to participate in those activities that interest him:
  - The Book Bunker has books for all ages. If your child is unable to visit, you may attend and borrow books on his behalf.
  - Play Therapy offers individual and group support.
  - The Youth Arts Program offers a range of arts, crafts and leisure activities for young people.
  - Radio Bedrock and the Starlight Express Room provide a variety of entertainment.
  - There are a number of paintings and other artworks around our hospital that you and your child may like to view and enjoy.
  - You may also like to visit our Chinese Garden and bird aviary to enjoy the pleasant sounds and fresh air.

- If your child is able to complete school work from bed, organise with his school to provide work that may be completed during the hospital stay. If your child will be in hospital for more than one week, you may contact the Hospital School, which is part of the Department of Education and Training, to organise your child’s schooling during his stay.

- The following is a guide of age-specific support you may provide for your child during his hospital stay:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baby/Toddler</th>
<th>Pre-school/School aged child</th>
<th>Adolescent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfort your baby by holding, cuddling and singing to him.</td>
<td>Comfort your child by cuddling, hugging or talking to him.</td>
<td>Comfort your child by hugging or talking to him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In order to maintain some rituals from home, feed, bath and attend to other needs of your baby.</td>
<td>In order to maintain some routines, attend to the basic needs of your child, such as bathing or dressing, yourself.</td>
<td>In order to allow your child a feeling of control make sure you include him in discussions relating to his condition and treatment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your baby is upset or unsettled, gently rock or play some music to help calm him.</td>
<td>Let your child know that it is okay to cry. You may also suggest that your child keep a diary to record thoughts and feelings through words or pictures.</td>
<td>Encourage expressions of thoughts or feelings and address your child’s concerns. Pay attention to unasked questions and persuade him to keep a diary or express feelings through other means, such as art or music.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What you can do to help siblings cope with their brother/sister’s hospital stay

Concern about a sick sibling, separation from parents and changes to routines can all impact on your other children at home. Hence, you need to employ similar strategies used to prepare your ill child for hospital with your other children so they too are prepared. This will help alleviate any fear, concerns and insecurities they may have.

• Talk to your children about their sibling’s health. Tell them about the condition or illness and the need for a hospital visit, providing as much honest information as they can comprehend.

• Provide opportunities for them to ask questions and express their feelings.

• Involve siblings in reading about a hospital visit and in playing “hospital”, as you do with your ill child.

• While your child is in hospital, set aside some time just for siblings, so that they have the opportunity to spend some time with you. Remember to hold and comfort them if they are upset and show them you care.

• Make sure you remember and are present at the important events in their lives such as birthdays, school concerts or sports events.

• When you need to be at the Hospital, organise for someone, trusted by both you and your children, to look after them. Speak to your children by phone as often as you can while you are away. You might also record messages or lullabies to be used when you are away.

• It is important for siblings to interact with each other as often as possible, especially during a hospital stay. Encourage siblings to send drawings and cards to their brother or sister, talk on the phone and visit the Hospital, when possible.

• Our hospital has a Sibling Care Centre which provides child minding for brothers and sisters of children who are in our hospital. You may wish to utilise this service which operates from 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday and 10am to 2pm most weekends and charges a small fee.

• Depending on each child, it may be important to inform siblings’ teachers of the changes in the home environment so that they may receive any special care required whilst at school.

Coming home from a hospital visit

Although you are returning to your familiar environment and routines, your child’s hospital stay will impact on your homecoming and bring with it some adjustments. In some cases, the homecoming may require you to prepare for it as you did for the hospital visit itself.

After-care needs to be addressed prior to your child’s discharge from hospital

• Ask members of your child’s health care team for information on diet, medications and care for your child upon his return home.

• Find out about any signs or symptoms to watch for which may be possible complications of a treatment or medication your child has had. Obtain details of who to contact should you have concerns once you arrive home.

• Be sure to make any follow-up appointments or pick up referrals to see specialists or therapists.

• If your child will be requiring short or long term use of special equipment, you will need to find out about its operation, maintenance and possible malfunctions. If it is a long term or permanent change, you may need to make certain modifications to your home prior to your child’s return. In such situations, be sure to arrange any home education that is available and ask members of your child’s health care team for help. Kids Health at our hospital can also provide you with support groups for specific conditions.
Helping your child adjust back to everyday life

Some children may return to home life quite quickly, while others look to you for some guidance. Your child's hospital stay, illness, physical abilities, appearance, medications and ongoing care will all affect the time it takes for him to settle back into old routines. During the adjustment period, your child may return to earlier stages of behaviour or development, want extra attention, have trouble sleeping or even act aggressively.

You can help your child by:

• Understanding these behaviours to be normal and temporary.
• Allowing your child to express his feelings and offering your child comfort, support and reassurance.
• Spending as much time with your child as you can, trying not to leave him for extended periods of time.
• Helping your child to return to his routines and responsibilities as soon as possible. However, be sure to match these to your child’s current level of abilities.
• Encouraging your child to keep a diary of words or pictures of his experience, while having him join in healthy child play as well.
• Providing siblings with opportunities to voice their concerns as well. Be sure to comfort, support and reassure them.
• Making teachers aware of any issues or special needs that your child may need addressed.

Remember, looking after yourself is vitally important so that you may look after your children well.

Always remember, you know your children the best.

Above all, be there for your children, comfort and support them.