

FACTSHEET

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Children's painful procedures and operations

How can parents help?

Sometimes medical procedures can be scary and 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 also help your child cope with the procedure or surgery.

Things you can do

- Talk to your child's doctor about the procedure/operation. Ask any questions that you or your child may have.
- Give your child 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).
- Give the explanation when you can, 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 your child to have a parent present during a painful procedure and 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 (there are many apps [eg: smiling mind] and youtube clips for younger children to assist with these strategies)
 - listening to music (if your child needs to be still, keep the music relaxed and slow)

Praise your 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 them know that it is OK to feel upset. Your child does not need to be brave.

Maintaining a calm environment will help your child to stay calm and focused. Limit the amount of noise in the room and choose one person who will talk to the child during the procedure.

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 appropriate choices that can be followed through.

For children over three it can also be helpful to give them 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 them cope. Some children may want to draw a picture or talk to family and friends 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 help your child cope with the procedure or surgery.
- Be honest and calm when telling 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.

If your child needs support for procedures, or experiences anxiety, you can contact the Child Life Therapy Departments at:

- Sydney Children’s Hospital - 9382 6984
- The Children’s Hospital at Westmead – 9845 3717
SCHN-CHW-ChildLifeTherapy@health.nsw.gov.au
- John Hunter Children’s Hospital - 4985 5410
HNELHD-MACLtherapy@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au