



Children's
of Alabama®

Preparing Your Child for Surgery

(Toddlers 1 – 3 years)

Patient and Family Education

You can help prepare your child for surgery. Preparing ahead of time can help:

- Calm your toddler's fears.
- Make recovery easier and faster.
- Educate you on the surgical process and how to help your child through their recovery

What are some common stressors for toddlers?

Toddlers are often afraid of new or different things. This list has some common fears for toddlers:

- Being away from you and other caregivers
- Unfamiliar environment
- Loss of control
- Unfamiliar medical equipment
- Loss of routine
- Being left alone
- Pain
- Strangers

How can I help prepare my toddler for surgery?

This list of tips can help you when you talk with your child about surgery.

Talk with your child

- Tell your toddler about the surgery 1 – 2 days before it happens. Your child will not have as much time to worry or dream about the surgery this way.
- Read books to your toddler about going to the hospital. Young children may be scared when they see the doctor wearing a mask and cap.
 - *A Visit to the Sesame Street Hospital* by Deborah Hautzig shows pictures of what the doctors will look like.
 - We can also give you a mask and cap that your child can see or play with.
- Allow your child to “play out” the surgery on a doll or stuffed animal. Playing with a doctor or nurse kit is a fun way for your toddler to act out his fears.
- Make sure your child understands that their surgery is not a punishment.
- Offer praise, positive reinforcement, and support.

Choosing your words

- Speak in a way that your toddler can understand.
- Speak simply with your child and be careful of the words you use. For example:
 - Instead of saying “The doctor will put you to sleep with some gas.”
 - Say, “The doctor will help you take a special nap so you don’t feel anything while you are sleeping.”
 - Remind your child that this special nap is different than when they fall asleep at night
- Instead of using the words “hurt” or “pain”, use words like “sore” or “achy”.
 - Your child will be after surgery. Tell them that they will be able to have medicine to help them feel better.
- Be honest. Avoid making promises you can’t keep, such as, “I promise it won’t hurt.” Being truthful helps to build trust.

- Avoid giving false reasons for the hospital visit.

The Hospital Visit

- To help your toddler feel like they have some control, allow them to choose a favorite stuffed animal, toy or blanket to bring with them.
- Let your child know that you will wait close by during their surgery and will see them as soon as they get to their room.
- It's normal for toddlers to become fussy and have behavior changes during this time. Be patient and try to remain calm so you can help your child.
- You can request to see a Child Life specialist prior to your child's surgery to help with coping throughout the surgical process

Take care of yourself too

- Make sure that you know about your child's surgery and know what to expect. This can help reduce your fears about it.
- Make sure that you, your toddler, and your family are well rested.
- Take care of yourself. Your child can pick up on and react to your stress level.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.