



Preparing Your Child for Surgery (Preschool 4 – 5 years)

Children's
of Alabama®

Patient and Family Education

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's health care team about specific care for your child.

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

- Calm your child'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 of preschoolers?

Young children are often afraid of new or different things. The list below has some common fears for preschoolers:

- Being away from you and other caregivers
- Being left alone
- Needles and shots
- Loss of routine
- Thinking they are in the hospital as a punishment
- Loss of control
- Being in an unfamiliar place
- Pain
- Being away from home

How Can I help prepare my child for surgery?

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

Talk with your child

- Tell your child about 3 – 4 days before surgery. Avoid too much detail.
- Read Books to your child about going to the hospital. Young children may be scared when they see the doctor wearing a mask and cap.
 - A Visit to Sesame Street Hospital by Deborah Hautzig shows pictures of what people and things will look like.
 - You can also ask the doctor for 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 child to act out their fears.
- Make sure your child understands that their surgery is not a punishment. Help your child understand why they needs surgery.
- Preschoolers have very active imaginations. Make sure your child does not have any misconceptions regarding their surgery.
- Offer praise, positive reinforcement, and support.

Choosing your words

- Speak in a way that your child can understand.
- Speak simply with your child and be mindful 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 fall asleep. You will breathe some sleepy medicine through a mask. The sleepy medicine helps 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 sore. Tell them that they will be able to have medicine to help them feel better.
- Explain how the surgery can help in a way that your child can understand.
 - For example, “After the doctor fixes your heart, you will be able to play longer without getting tired or you will be able to run without getting tired”.
- Be honest. Avoid making promises you can’t keep, such as, “I promise it won’t hurt.” Also, avoid giving false reasons for the hospital visit. Being truthful helps to build trust.

The Hospital Visit

Your child will visit the hospital prior to their surgery for a pre-admission appointment where your child will have labs drawn, chest x-ray, electrocardiogram (EKG) and a chance to meet their surgical team.

- You and your child will have a chance to ask questions.
- You can meet a Child Life specialist who will be able to explain the surgery in a developmentally appropriate way and help with coping throughout the surgical process.

The surgery

- To help your child feel like they have some control, allow your child to choose a favorite stuffed animal, toy or blanket to bring to the hospital.
- Let your child know that you will wait close by during their surgery and will see them as soon as they get to his room.
- Be patient with your child. It is normal for preschoolers to need more attention during this time. These behaviors can also be normal during this time:
 - Your child may become uncooperative or throw temper tantrums.
 - Your child may revert to younger behaviors such as bedwetting or thumb sucking.
 - These behaviors usually improve after the stress of surgery has passed.

Take care of yourself

- 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 child 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.