



NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S
When your child needs a hospital, everything matters.™

Helping Hand™

Health Education for Patients and Families

Helping Children Cope During Visits to the Doctor

When a child needs to see the doctor or go to the hospital, parents often want to know how they can make the experience easier. Here are some things you can try, based on your child's age and stage of development.

Infants

In their first year, babies learn to develop trust in people who give nurturing, consistent care. They learn to trust their caregivers by using their five senses: touch, taste, smell, seeing and hearing.

- Smile at your baby. Talk softly to them, using a soothing voice. Play gentle music or musical toys.
- Calm your baby with a soothing touch. If possible, have your baby held by someone they know at the doctor's office.
- Distract your baby by singing, making funny faces or playing peek-a-boo.
- Consider breastfeeding during a visit to the doctor, especially after stressful parts, such as taking vitals, having a blood draw and getting a vaccine.

Toddlers

Toddlers are learning how to make good choices. They are becoming more independent and learning self-control.

- Ask your health care team if a family member or friend your child knows can be with you for support.
- Let your child sit on your lap, if allowed.

- Give your toddler choices, but make the choices realistic. Let them choose between no more than two things. For example, you can ask, “Which arm would you like to use?” or “Would you like the nurse to listen to your heart first or to look in your ears first?”
- Use distraction. You can do things like blowing soap bubbles, using “magic wands”, singing or reading books with your child.
- Tell your toddler you will be seeing the doctor (or going to the hospital) no more than a day before the visit.
- Explain what the doctor or nurse is doing using simple words your toddler understands. Avoid scaring your child. Focus on what your child will see, hear or taste.

Preschoolers

Preschool-age children have active imaginations. Sometimes they have trouble knowing the difference between what is real and what is fantasy. Because of this, it helps for them to know what to expect during the visit.

- A preschooler will do better having a person they know in the room. If you can, have your preschooler sit on your lap.
- As with a toddler, offer your preschooler appropriate choices. “Would you like the nurse to listen to your heart first or to look in your ears first?”
- Get your preschooler involved. Have them help the doctor or nurse. For example, a child can hold things or open the Band-Aid[®]. Let your preschooler choose what distraction technique will help them best.
- Read books about going to the doctor. Let your child pretend to be the doctor and talk about what will happen. Use a doll or stuffed animal, and let your preschooler practice with the toy. You can also ask the doctor to do the exam on the doll or caregiver first.

School age

School age children are learning how to cooperate with others. They are also learning what others expect them to do.

- Focus on positive behaviors and strengths and reinforce them.
- Prepare your child about a day or two before the visit. Be honest and give your child time to ask questions and talk about their worries. Do not make promises you cannot keep or do not know the answer to. For example: if your child may get a shot, it is important you do not tell them they will not get a shot.

- Let your child choose a coping technique for parts of the visit they find stressful. Examples include reading a story, taking deep breaths, using a headset to listen to music, watching the procedure, holding a parent's hand. Practice these skills before going to the doctor's office.
- Let your child know it is okay to cry but they need to hold still.

Teens

Teens are learning to make independent decisions. They are concerned with body image, their privacy and peer relationships. Let your teen be alone with the doctor during the exam. This helps them learn to become more comfortable and independent talking with health care providers. It also gives them privacy.

- Talk about what is going to happen about a week in advance. Encourage your teen to take part in the decision-making. Be honest and encourage them to ask the doctor or nurse questions.
- Encourage your teen to choose a coping technique for any parts of the visit they might find stressful. Coping techniques can include listening to music, watching or helping with the procedure and relaxation.

General tips

The following tips are good to keep in mind for children of all ages.

- Remember to set a good example. Show your child how to behave. Be a role model for positive attitudes and actions.
- Focus on the positive.
- Avoid threats. Do not say things like “if you are not good, the doctor will give you a shot.”
- Be prepared. Bring objects, such as toys, books, activities and things to keep your child busy as you will likely need to wait.
- Rewards work better than bribes. Bribes are giving your child a reward before the appointment if they promise to be on their best behavior during the appointment. Rewarding your child is offering a treat after the appointment if they made their best effort during the appointment.
- Sometimes a child's peers can play a role in preparing the child. They can suggest ways that have helped them cope.
- Do not be afraid to speak up for your child's needs and ask questions about their care. For example, you can ask the doctor or nurse to speak more slowly or to explain things using plain language you can easily understand.