

Helping Children Cope When a Child Needs to See 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 for their child. Here are some things you can try, based on your child's age and stage of development.

Infants

In their first year babies are learning to develop trust in those people who provide nurturing, consistent care. They learn to trust their caregivers by using all five of their senses.

- Smile at your baby and use a soothing voice, sing songs, and talk softly. Play gentle music or musical toys.
- Calm your baby with a soothing touch. If possible, have your baby held by someone your infant knows.
- Distract your baby with a rattle or eye-catching object.

Toddlers

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

- Ask a family member or friend your child knows to be with you for support.
- Let your child sit on your lap, if possible.
- Give your toddler choices, but make them 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: Blow soap bubbles or use "magic wands"; read musical books with your child.
- Tell your toddler you will be seeing the doctor (or going to the hospital) no more than a day ahead of time.
- 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, taste, etc.

Preschoolers

- Preschoolers have a very active imagination. Sometimes they have trouble knowing the difference between what is real and what is fantasy.
- A preschooler will do better having a familiar person in the room. If possible, have your preschooler sit on your lap.
- Offer your preschooler appropriate choices.
- Get your preschooler involved by having him or her help the doctor or nurse. For example, a child can hold things, open the Band-Aid[®], etc. Let your preschooler choose what distraction technique will help him or her 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.

School Age

- School age children are learning how to compete and 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 week ahead of the visit. Be honest and give your child time to ask questions and talk about his worries.
- Let your child choose a coping technique (read a story, use a headset to listen to music, watch the procedure, hold a parent's hand, etc.)
- Let your child know it is okay to cry as long as he or she holds still.

Adolescent

- Teens and adolescents are learning to make independent decisions. They are concerned with body image, their privacy and peer relationships.
- Let your adolescent be alone with the doctor during the exam.
- Talk about what is going to happen and encourage your teen to take part in decision-making at least a week in advance. Be honest and encourage your adolescent to ask the doctor or nurse any questions he or she may have.
- Encourage your adolescent to choose a coping technique (listening to music, watching and/or helping with the procedure, imagery and relaxation, etc.)

General Tips

Remember to set a good example and show your child how to behave. Be a role model for positive attitudes and actions.

Be sure to stay alert for signs your child is fearful or does not understand what is happening.

Be careful about offering rewards. There is a fine line between the use of rewards and bribes.

Sometimes, a child's peers can play a role in preparing the child and 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 his or her care. For example, you can ask the doctor or nurse to speak more slowly or to "please explain things using plain language."

Adapted from "Kids Can Cope" by The Family and Volunteer Services Department, Nationwide Children's Hospital, 1998