

Sometimes the hospital can be a scary place filled with new and unfamiliar experiences. Your child may not know what to expect. This can increase your child's stress and anxiety and make it hard to cope. Medical play can help children learn, cope and feel a sense of control over their healthcare experience.

What is medical play?

- Medical play is a safe, fun way for your child to learn about medical supplies, the medical setting and medical procedures. Play is familiar and comforting to children and helps them learn about the world around them. Medical play is play based on medical events.
- Medical play can be adapted to fit any child's age, ability and learning style.
- A child life specialist can give your child the tools to do medical play.
- Real medical supplies or play doctor kits can be used during medical play.

What are the benefits of medical play?

Medical play helps your child to be more familiar with medical supplies. This may decrease your child's fear or anxiety. It also helps caregivers interact with your child.

Medical play helps your child:

- Explore the hospital setting through safe play.
- Work through their fear and anxiety related to their medical experience.
- Learn about medical supplies, their medical experience and diagnosis in a safe way.
- Feel more in control of their own experience.
- Express their feelings.
- Establish feelings of identity.
- Reflect on their medical experience.
- Use their experience to help in the future.
- Cope better with hospital stays.

Medical play also gives your child:

- An outlet to express themselves.
- The chance to be in control.
- The chance to be independent.
- The chance to explore the use of medical supplies.
- Knowledge about their diagnosis and plan of care.

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

Medical play, continued

What is child directed medical play?

During child directed medical play, your child is “in charge” and can make choices. Child directed medical play helps your child:

- Explore and express themselves.
- Work through their feelings, fear and anxiety.
- Feel empowered and in control. For example, it is OK if your child does not use medical supplies the right way. Let them make their own choice to use the supplies how they want.

How can I help my child?

Here are some guidelines for medical play:

- Give your child a choice about doing medical play.
- Let your child direct and control their own play. Your child may start and stop play as they choose. There is no wrong way to play.
- Give your child plenty of time to explore the supplies and play. Let your child play with the supplies as long or as short as they want.
- Encourage your child to play out their experience using a doll or stuffed animal as their “patient.” This helps keep the play safe.
- Listen and pay attention to your child as they play. You may be able to learn a lot about how your child feels about their medical experience. Asking questions like “What is that?” and “What is that for?” can help you learn what your child knows or fears about a medical procedure.
- Help your child know you are trying to understand their feelings. Being there also shows your support.
- Talk about anything that is not clear for your child. They may think some items are scarier than they really are. You may call a child life specialist as needed for support.
- Re-direct your child if the play becomes unsafe.

Sometimes, you may want to help your child learn about something specific. At these times you would use adult directed medical play.

What is adult directed medical play?

Adult directed medical play helps teach your child about their diagnosis or helps prepare them for their medical procedures. This type of medical play:

- Is based on specific medical events. For example, your child may get anxious about getting their vital signs checked at the doctor’s office. Your child can practice taking vital signs on a stuffed animal before your child gets their vital signs checked.
- Can give your child a sense of control.
- Can correct anything that is not clear to your child.
- Can help your child process their medical experience.

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Medical play, continued

What supplies can be used during medical play?

- Stuffed animals, blank cloth dolls and baby dolls
- Real medical supplies, such as:
 - Stethoscope
 - Syringe
 - Band aids
 - Gauze
 - Tape
 - Pulse oximeter (pulse ox)
 - Oral syringe
 - Hospital mask
 - Hospital hat
 - Gloves
 - Bandages
 - Cotton balls
- A play doctor kit (for younger children)
- Books and videos about medical events
- Books about the body

What are some ideas for medical play?

Babies (newborn to 1 year old)

- Play peek-a-boo with hospital masks and hats.
- Explore medical play supplies with hands.

Toddlers (1 to 3 years old)

- Let your child explore the medical supplies. It is OK if your child does not use the supplies the right way.
- Make an art collage with different medical supplies.
- Use medical supplies in your child’s usual, nonmedical play. This helps your child become more comfortable with the supplies. For example:
 - Play hide and seek with the pulse ox light.
 - Fill an oral syringe with water for water play.
 - Use band aids as stickers.

Preschoolers (3 to 5 years old)

- Use medical supplies and play doctor with stuffed animals or dolls.
- Use an oral syringe for painting or water play.
- Make an art collage with different medical supplies.
- Read books or watch videos about medical events.

School age children (6 to 12 years old)

- Give your child the chance to play with a play doctor kit or real medical supplies.
- Let your child play out medical experiences on a doll and explore how each item works.
- Use medical supplies to show and teach your child on a doll.

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Medical play, continued

- Fill an oral syringe with water for water play.
- Read books or watch videos about medical events.
- Focus on coping with pokes. (Child Life can provide support with needles. Caregivers can learn to provide support without needles.)
- Do medical art, such as:
 - Make an art collage with different medical supplies.
 - Paint with an oral syringe.
 - Build things with tongue depressors.

Teens (13 to 17 years old)

- Give your child the chance to play with a medical play kit or real medical supplies.
- Journal about the hospital experience.
- Scrapbook with medical supplies.
- Make an art collage with different medical supplies.

Talk with a child life specialist for more details.

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

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