

Tips for hospitalized preschoolers (3 to 5 years old)



Children react to and cope with being in the hospital based on their age. The information below includes preschoolers' fears and reactions to being in the hospital. There are ways to help your preschooler cope with medical experiences.

Your child may show behavior changes during and after their hospital stay. They may regress. This means they do things they have outgrown. Or, a behavior may happen more often than normal. This may be how your child reacts to stress. These changes may concern you. Some of these changes are normal and most often go away with time.

This age group fears:

- Separation from parents or caregivers
- Pain
- New situations
- A sense of loss of control
- Getting in trouble. (This age group may think the hospital or procedures are punishment.)

What changes could I see in my child?

Your child may have 1 or more of these behaviors:

- Fears you leaving
- Clings to you more
- Asks for help with things they can do themselves
- Temper tantrums
- Bedwetting
- Changes in eating
- Changes in sleep (may have nightmares)
- "Baby talk" or thumb sucking

What can I do to help my child?

Here are some tips that may help you and your child during and after being in the hospital:

- Give your child time to play. Play allows a child to:
 - Learn.
 - Feel in control.
 - Share how they feel.
- Play "doctor" or "nurse" with your child. Let them pretend that dolls or stuffed animals are the patients. This may help them share their feelings.

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

Tips for hospitalized preschoolers (3 to 5 years old), continued

- Talk to your child about why they are in the hospital.
 - Tell them what part of their body the doctor is trying to help.
 - Use words they understand.
- Be present and join in your child's care as much as possible.
- Be honest about pain.
 - Play is a great way to help a child cope with pain.
 - Let them know the doctor will give them medicine to help them feel better.
- Tell your child:
 - They did not do anything wrong.
 - You will take them home when it is time.
- Tell your child where you are going and when you will be back if you leave. They may be upset.
 - They will learn to trust that you will come back.
 - Give them something of yours to keep until you come back. This may be a picture, shirt, blanket or toy.
- Let your child do tasks on their own.
- Give realistic choices when possible. This helps to give your child a sense of control.
- Bring comfort items from home.
- Have patience with your child, but set limits. Discipline like you would at home.

Remember that behavior changes are common and most often go away. This is how your child copes with their hospital stay. If you have concerns or questions before you leave the hospital, please talk with a nurse, doctor or child life specialist.

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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