

# Family Education Sheet

## Helping Your Child Cooperate with Airway Clearance



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This family education sheet gives you some ideas for how to make airway clearance less of a struggle.

Getting your child to do airway clearance is one of the hardest parts of raising a child with CF. These treatments are time-consuming and many children see them as an unwanted interruption in their free time. Having to do airway clearance can also be an unwelcome daily reminder for both parents and children that a child has a chronic illness, and that they have to do things that other children don't have to do because of it.

Below are some suggestions for how to help your child cooperate with their daily treatments. They're based on the experiences of other parents of children with chronic illnesses and on child psychology research.

1. Break chest physical therapy into **negotiables and non-negotiables**. For example, it's non-negotiable that your child does their airway clearance as prescribed by their doctor. But things that could be negotiable are where they do it in your home, whether they do it at 5:00 p.m. or 5:30 p.m. and who is with them while they do it. Providing choices can give your child a sense of control and increases cooperation.
2. For many children, figuring out the negotiable parts of the airway clearance routine can be a **shared problem-solving activity**. You and your child can come up with ideas without evaluating them (brainstorm) and then decide whether each idea is one you'd like to try. For example, a child might suggest doing the exercise part of their airway clearance routine while walking the dog. It's important for you to help your child think through ideas. For example, ask what you'll do if it rains and they can't walk the dog.
3. Some ways to make airway clearance **more enjoyable** include:
  - Choosing a favorite TV show or game that your child watches/plays only during airway clearance
  - Playing favorite songs or recorded stories
  - Spending time playing, talking or singing with your child before, during and after airway clearance
  - Encouraging your child to blow a pinwheel or blow bubbles as they blow and cough
  - Asking responsible friends, relatives and siblings to join you and help vary the routine
4. Many families like to use **reward systems** to improve a child's cooperation. Examples of reward systems are a sticker chart and a "joy jar" with different special

activities on slips of paper that a child can pull out after reaching a goal. Reward systems can be very effective and there are some keys to making them work well:

- Set **reachable goals** to set your child up for success. The first goal should be just a little more than your child already does, even if that's less than what's prescribed. For example, if your child does their vest for 10 minutes a day, they could get a reward for doing it for 15 minutes. A good rule of thumb is to pick a goal you're 80% sure your child can reach. Not too easy, not too hard.
- **Small and immediate rewards** are much more powerful than rewards that take a long time to earn. For example, if your child gets to choose a game to play with a parent right after they do their vest, it's probably more effective than offering to buy them a new toy if they do their vest every day for 2 weeks.
- **Consistency** is very important! Reward systems are much more effective when they become part of your family's daily routine, so your child knows exactly what to expect when they reach their goal.

Whatever system you use in your family, remember: **Parents are the ones in charge!** Parents often feel badly that their child has to do airway clearance every day (understandably!) so they may be more likely to give in when a child refuses to do it. However, non-negotiables are just that: non-negotiable. The less you debate/give in on the non-negotiables with your child, the sooner they're likely to accept them.

Although using a vest may seem like an activity your child can do alone (or a good time for parents to get other things done!) many children do best when they're **with their family** while they do this treatment. For example, they might be able to play a favorite game or watch a show in the family room with a parent while they do their vest. This keeps children from feeling excluded because of their treatments and because they have CF.

Exercise is an important part of your child's airway clearance routine. Exercise can improve their lung function and self-esteem and help them build lasting, healthy habits.

Your child's respiratory therapist, nurses or social worker on the CF team can be great resources for coming up with ideas for how to have your child cooperate with their airway clearance routine.