

Family Education Sheet

Preparing Your Child for a Hospital Stay or a Procedure



Boston Children's Hospital
Until every child is well™

Clinical Education & Informatics
family.ed@childrens.harvard.edu



There are many ways for you to help prepare your child for a hospital stay or procedure.

What should I tell my child?

What to tell your child about his upcoming hospital visit depends on his age and how much he can understand. Remember, all children develop at different speeds, regardless of their age. Use the tips that you feel are best for your child.

Age-based guidelines

Infant and toddlers

Infants and toddlers are sensitive to their surroundings.

- Bring objects from home to the hospital to comfort them. These might be favorite toys or blankets.

2- to 6-year-olds

Children between 2 and 6 should be able to understand why they are going to the hospital when you tell them.

- Use easy-to-understand language to explain why your child has to go to the hospital and what will happen there.
- Let your child pretend to be a doctor by taking care of a doll or toy. He can pretend to operate on it, give it shots or just put on a Band-Aid. This can help him express his thoughts and feelings.
- Tell your child that you'll be at the hospital with him, and that other people will take care of him when you can't be with him.

6- to 12-year-olds

Many of our suggestions for children ages 2 to 6 also work for this age group. However, be prepared because children in this age group may ask more questions!

- Explain to your child that doctors, nurses and others at the hospital will do certain tests and procedures to make him feel better. Tell him that additional tests or procedures may be done to make sure he's healing.

Teens

Teens are able to understand more information about their surgery, but may not understand everything. Some may be afraid to ask questions.

- Include your teen in planning for his hospital stay.
- Include your teen in talks and decisions about his care so he will feel more in control.
- Encourage your teen to ask questions, whether it's about his condition or worries about the upcoming hospital stay.
- Your teen may be worried about his privacy. Tell him that hospital staff will honor his privacy and treat him with respect.
- It may be helpful for your teen to pack some of his favorite things to bring to the hospital, like a book or video.

When should I tell my child about the hospital stay?

Finding the right time to tell your child about his hospital stay or procedure may depend on his age and how much he understands.

- Pre-school children, for example, do best when they get information a day or 2 before the event.
- Older children most often need more time to think it through, talk about it and ask questions.

For more information

For more information on how to prepare for a visit to Boston Children's Hospital, contact:

The Hale Family Center for Families (617) 355-6279
www.childrenshospital.org/patient-resources/family-resources/the-center-for-families

The Hale Family Center for Families is dedicated to supporting families through their experience at Boston Children's. From before patient families arrive to after they go home, the Center is available to answer questions and provide resources. Services include help finding accommodation, wellness programs, access to computers, a children's activity space and more.

Office of Child Life Services (617) 355-6551
www.childrenshospital.org/patient-resources/family-resources/child-life-specialists

Child Life specialists focus on patients' emotional, social and cognitive growth during a hospital stay. They give special consideration to each child's family, culture and stage of development. They use techniques like play to help children understand the hospital and their medical situation.

General advice for talking with your child

Set the stage

Choose a quiet time to talk. Use a calm and relaxed tone of voice. Tell your child that he will be going to the hospital for an operation, test or procedure, and let him know that you feel this is the right thing to. Children can usually sense how a parent feels.

Talk about the hospital

Ask what your child knows or thinks about the hospital. Listen to his feelings and help him talk about it. Depending on his age, you might want to start by talking about what a hospital is. You might say, "The hospital is a place where people of all ages go when their bodies need some help. The doctors and nurses know a lot about how our bodies work. They try to help us get well, feel better and stay healthy." Let your child know it's OK to feel curious, worried, angry or frustrated about going to the hospital.

Pack some favorite things

Encourage your child to pack his favorite things, such as a stuffed animal, pillow or books.

This Family Education Sheet is available in [Arabic](#) and [Spanish](#).