

Parental Tips:

Before Your Preschooler or Young Child Has Surgery

As a parent you are naturally concerned when your child needs to be hospitalized. The following information may be helpful to you and your child at this time:

- Preschool children typically are preoccupied with or are concerned about their bodies. If children of preschool age get ill, they may think that they will never get well again. Small boo-boos are likely to require much attention.
- If surgery is needed, be explicit about which body part will be affected. Reassure your child that no other body parts will be changed during the operation. It is also important to describe the IV (if needed) to your child and reassure your child that it will not become a permanent part of his or her body. You can explain that, "Your hand will look the same as it always has once the IV is removed".
- Sometimes it is helpful to read a book about the hospital with your child and discuss his or her particular experience.
- Concentrate on what your child will see, hear, feel and smell, such as a "quick pinch of the finger" for blood work or a "funny smelling mask" over the face. It may help to use a doll to serve as a "patient" and illustrate to your child what will happen. Allow your child to play with a toy doctor's kit and mask or gown.
- We suggest you prepare your child for a hospital stay two to three days before the procedure. Encourage your child to ask questions and give praise when they are expressed.
- Reassure your child that he or she can take a favorite toy or blanket to the operating room for security. Also, reassure your child that he or she did nothing to cause the illness or operation, and that the hospitalization is not punishment of any kind.
- Describe the anesthesia as a "special nap" that is different from the usual sleep at home.



- Prepare your child for some discomfort after the operation and focus on things that they can do independently to feel better, such as taking pain medicine and drinking plenty of fluids.
- Preschoolers depend on others to notice their pain. Watch for restlessness, whining, increase or decrease in activity or loss of appetite, and let the nurse know.
- Your child may regress after surgery or hospitalization. For example, there may be some disruption in potty training or newly acquired skills, or your child may be more fearful and clingy. Children may also express anger toward parents and there may be some waking at night. These are normal behaviors and generally disappear in a few days. Be supportive and comforting, and gently urge your child to resume his or her normal routines.

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