

## Parental Tips:

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### **Before Your Toddler Has Surgery**

As a parent you will naturally be concerned when one of your children needs to be hospitalized. The following information illustrates how a toddler typically responds to surgery/hospitalization and offers guidelines to help you at this time:

- Children in the Toddler stage are testing new abilities and want to do things by themselves. New abilities for toddlers are controlling the bladder and walking. A toddler's thinking is magical and concrete. Separation from parents is the main issue of toddlers.
- We suggest that you prepare your toddler for surgery or hospitalization the day before or the morning of the procedure. Since toddlers have not yet developed a good sense of time, preparing them too far ahead will not have very much meaning to them.
- When preparing your toddler for a hospital stay, use a picture book about the hospital and tell your child the things that will happen.
- Familiarize yourself with the toddler's vocabulary, particularly for pain. For an example, a blood test may be called a "shot", a "poke", a "sting" or "hurt" by the child. Also, let the nurse know of any problems you have had in the past and suggestions you could make for the best success. Provide comfort immediately following the procedure.
- Explain the steps of a procedure using the child's vocabulary ("The nurse will use a big rubber band to hug or squeeze your arm".)
- Prepare your child for the procedure ("You will feel a stick") or use your child's word of choice. Include an explanation of why the procedure needs to be done ("We need to test your blood to see if it's healthy enough to have surgery")
- Reward the child for any positive behavior. This may help the child later when other procedures are necessary.
- Bring a favorite toy, blanket, or other security item to help decrease stress. Give a

simple explanation of what caused the illness and explain that the child's thoughts or feelings did not cause the illness.

- Your child may regress after surgery or hospitalization. There may be some disruption in potty training or other newly-acquired skills. Toddlers may be clingy and fearful for several days. They may also express anger toward parents, exhibit changes in sleeping and eating habits, and be more restless or tense than usual. These are normal behaviors and usually disappear in a few days. Be supportive and comforting and try to keep the routine as close to that of home as possible.
- Play is important to a toddler so encourage time for activity to release negative feelings, and practice developmental skills.
- Provide reassurance that you will meet your child after the operation and that you will stay with your child all the time. Make sure you are in your child's room when he/she returns. It is very important to toddlers to have their parents or their primary caretaker stay with them overnight.
- Remember that anxious parents may unknowingly transfer anxiety to their child. Meet with your nurse or doctor about any other orientations for families to help decrease stress associated with surgery.

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