

TIPS on How to Support Your Child Having Surgery

If you want or need assistance supporting your child, our Child Life Specialist can be reached at [325-747-6198](tel:325-747-6198).

SELF CARE

A child having surgery is naturally stressful and anxiety producing for caregivers. Children notice their caregivers' anxiety and this can lead to anxiety for them. What helps you be calm? If you need more information about the surgery, anesthesia, or recovery process please ask the healthcare team for more information. Caregivers' calm and supportive presence help children cope with the stressors of surgery.

TALK

Tell your child calmly in simple well-chosen words about the surgery plans. Teens and pre-teens can be told about the surgery when it is determined they need the surgery. Younger children can be told the day before and toddlers and infants the morning of. Avoid words and phrases that children may find frightening.

Examples:

| AVOID | CHOOSE MORE GENTLE WORDS |
|----------------|--|
| “put to sleep” | “a doctor is going to give you medicine to help you take a special nap where you won't hear, see, or feel anything while the doctor helps your body” |
| “cut you open” | “make a small opening to help your body and then close it before you wake up” |
| “stitches” | “strings to help your body heal” |

Children tend to interpret things literally based on their limited life experience. Point out the benefits of the surgery and that everyone at the hospital is there to help them be healthy. Encourage your child to ask questions and share their feelings. This will give you an opportunity to correct any misconceptions related to the hospital/surgery and give an opportunity to validate their feelings. For example, some children may think they will die in the hospital if that happened to a loved one or some think surgery is a punishment. Being honest will help develop a trusting life long relationship between you and them as well as with the healthcare team. Avoid teasing, joking, or telling children painful or scary stories about the hospital or doctor's office. If you want or need assistance supporting your child, a child life specialist can assist you.

PACK

This is a good thing for you to do together. Sometimes unexpected upset stomachs occur or an unplanned longer stay is needed. Just in case, please bring a complete change of comfortable loose fitting clothes, that are easy to put on, and shoes for both of you. A change of undergarments for your child and a light jacket for yourself are good ideas as well as sometimes rooms are cool. Familiar comforting and entertaining items for your child such as their pillows, blanket, pacifier, stuffed animal, favorite toys, tablets, and chargers are perfect items to bring along for comfort and play. Preferred bottles and sippy cups can be packed as well, however most children should not drink or eat before surgery and until after the procedure. Hospital staff will let you know when your child should resume drinking and eating.



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PLAY AND CUDDLE

Let kids be kids and play; it is what kids do the most. It is how they learn and cope. If your child does not feel like playing and wants to cuddle, instead cuddle as needed.

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SEPARATION ANXIETY

Due to the nature of surgery, there will be a time when your child will need to go with staff to the operating room. Time apart from your child will be kept as short as possible. When it comes time for your child to go with hospital staff please calmly and casually encourage them to go with the staff and that you will see them in a little bit. Younger children can take a stuffed animal or special blanket with them. Please stay in the patient room until staff directs you to the waiting area. It is required for a guardian to remain on-site during their child's procedure.

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AFTER SURGERY

The surgeon will come update you once the surgery is complete. Your child will spend some time after surgery in the post anesthesia care unit (PACU) for monitoring prior to returning to the room with you. Sometimes children remain sleepy when returning to the room. Allowing them to sleep can be helpful. A few children may wake up crying, confused, emotionally upset, hungry, irritable, or thirsty. Some families find holding and consoling their child helpful as this reassure them they are present with them. Children may need to be reminded of where they are and what has happened. Some children just want to be left alone in the bed. Flexibility regarding sometimes changing needs can be key. Ask staff for assistance as needed. Some children may return with in IV on their hand or arm that they did not have before surgery. A helpful explanation is that this is a straw on their arm to give special medicine while they are here. If they have a bandage, let them know this is to help their body. If your child is trying to pull these items off please gently remind them what it is and redirect their hand and attention away; hold them in your lap, cuddle, watch tv, or play. Ask the nurses for assistance as needed. The IV will be removed before being sent home. This involves tape being taken off and then the IV straw easily slides out. Younger children can be held in your lap for the IV removal so they know you are with them and they are safe in your arms. If you have questions about logistics of the procedure, please contact the location of the child's scheduled procedure directly and they will be able to assist you. They will be reaching out to you prior to the surgery date. If your child has special needs please let us know. Your surgeon's office can also be a helpful source of information.

Downtown Surgery: 325-747-5390 West Surgery Center: 325-747-5801 South Surgery Center: 325-747-2902

Child Life Specialist, Elizabeth Bailey, 325-747-6198.



Scan to Watch a Short Video
on Supporting Your Child
in the Hospital



Source: University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital