

Tips to Help Your Preschooler Cope with Surgery

Preschoolers are curious and imaginative. They often have many questions and can have misconceptions about the surgery. Be open and honest when talking to your child about their surgery. This will foster a trusting relationship. Dishonesty can result in mistrust and fear. If your child becomes upset, take this opportunity to help identify ways they can cope. Remember that crying and being afraid are normal reactions.

Although they may not completely understand why they are having surgery, they benefit from simple explanations given 3-5 days before their surgery. Focus on what they will see, feel, and hear. Details about the surgery is not necessary as your child will be asleep. Remind them about their surgery the evening before and help them pack some of their favorite things.

Preschoolers may find the following stressful:

- Separation from parents
- Unfamiliar people
- Loss of control
- Medical equipment and procedures

Preparing your preschooler for surgery:

- Children at this age may think they are going to the hospital because they have done something wrong or bad. Reassure your child that this is not true and ensure they know why they are going to the hospital.
- Be open and honest with your child. Explain why and when your child is having surgery. Use words your child will understand, “the doctor is going to fix your throat”. Be careful with the words you use. Saying you will be “put to sleep” may remind your child of a pet being put to sleep. Try saying “you will be getting some sleepy medicine.”
- Your child may think that going to the hospital is scarier than his or her surgery. It is important to understand and correct any misconceptions your child may have. Explain what they will see, hear, smell, taste, and feel (touch).
- Your child may be worried about being away from you or being with unfamiliar people. Talk about who they will meet. Try to have at least one familiar caregiver with your child as much as possible. If you have to be separated, tell them when you will see them next.
- Offer choices whenever possible to give your child a sense of control. For example, “Do you want to take your medicine with apple juice or water?”
- Bring a doll or teddy from home. If possible, have the teddy do the task first. For example, taking blood pressure or medication.
- Research shows that reassurance, such as “you’ll be ok”, is actually not helpful to coping. Instead try saying, “I’ll be there in the hospital with you”.
- Some stories that may help prepare your child are “*Franklin Goes to the Hospital*” and “*Curious George Goes to the Hospital*”.
- Please do not hesitate to ask questions or explain to staff what helps your child.
- Although we do our best to run on time, please plan for long waits.