

When a Child Is Hospitalized

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR PARENTS



Talking About Going to the Hospital

Whether for a check-up with a pediatrician or an overnight surgery stay, going to the hospital can be a frightening and confusing experience for children of all ages. A difficult thing for many children to understand is why something has to hurt or make them feel badly in order to make them feel better. Not talking with the child at all about going, or telling them too much can make the situation more difficult.

Child Life Specialists

At the hospital, you may encounter a Child Life Specialist, who is an expert in child development. Their job is to help your child cope with hospitalization in the best way possible, through play, preparation, education, and expressive activities like arts and crafts. They are there to provide informational and emotional support for your child and your family, making sure to aid your child's development along the way. In other words, they help your child maintain the best outlook possible on medical experiences—an outlook that they can carry with them for medical experiences in the future.

Although a child life specialist will be available to you once your child enters the hospital, there are several things you can do to help your child cope with the situation at home. Here are some tips organized by age group:

0-3 Years

- If possible, plan doctor's visits or procedures around your child's normal routine.
- Bring your child's pacifier, bottle, teddy bear, blanket or other comforting objects from home.
- Ask friends and family members for their support. Try to be sure that you or one of them is with your child at all times—this can be especially helpful when you need a short break.
- Reassure your child that you will be with them as much as possible.

- Spend time reading to your child about going to the doctor or visiting the hospital (see resources for some titles).

3-6 Years

- Start preparing your child one or two days in advance.
- Allow them to pack their own overnight bag, choosing which pajamas to bring and other items to include. When packing, have the child include some familiar objects from home, such as favorite toys, blankets, dolls, or stuffed animals.
- If the child will be hospitalized for an extended length of time, it might be helpful to bring a new toy, just to give them something fresh and engaging to lift their spirits along the way.
- Read books about hospitalization or doctor's visits with your child.
- It can be fun and beneficial to play doctor or nurse with your child beforehand, using pretend medical equipment.

6-12 Years

- Start preparing your child four or five days before the appointment if possible.
- Bring favorite toys or games.
- Be honest and upfront about the hospital visit.
- Respect your child's questions and concerns and encourage them to express to you what they are thinking or questioning.
- This age group is growing interested in privacy, so you will want to emphasize that their privacy will be respected while in the hospital. As a parent, you also should be ready to advocate for your child's privacy to medical staff.

12-18 Years

- Teenagers understand more information about their hospitalization, but that doesn't mean they understand everything. Encourage them to ask questions—if not to you, then to a doctor or nurse.
- Be sure they are included in decisions that need to be made regarding treatment or the hospital stay.
- They may be worried about their privacy, especially when they may be facing surgery. Ensure them that their privacy will be respected.
- Familiar objects such as their iPod, favorite DVDs, or journals can be helpful.
- Encourage visits or communication from friends and peers, whether via phone, email, or in person.

Please see reverse for Vanderbilt Kennedy Center programs

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Information for Parents

How We Can Help

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC) works with and for people with disabilities and family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be both a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

This free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has 1,600 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. See Health as well as other topic pages. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities. Contact www.familypathfinder.org (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

Vanderbilt Kennedy Family Outreach Center

This center provides families with a single point of entry into the many services and supports of the VKC, Vanderbilt University, and the community. Services include research projects, clinics, social work services, and recreational and arts programs. Contact familyoutreach@vanderbilt.edu, (615) 936-5118.

Two Ways to Take Part in Research

The VKC serves families through research studies. **StudyFinder**, a searchable database, lists studies seeking people of all ages with and without disabilities. See kc.vanderbilt.edu/studyfinder. **Research Family Partners** allows families with and without disabilities to register and to be contacted when a study begins for which a family might be eligible. Contact kc.vanderbilt.edu/RFP, (615) 936-0448, toll-free (866) 936-8852.

Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt Child Life Department

www.vanderbiltchildrens.com/interior.php?mid=204
Pre-Surgery Tours for children and families
www.vanderbiltchildrens.com
Health Library, Jr. League Family Resource Center
www.vanderbiltchildrens.com/healthlibrary
(615) 936-2558, toll-free (800) 288-0391

National Resources

The Child Life Council
www.childlife.org
American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org
KidsHealth
www.kidshealth.org

Helpful Articles

“Coping in the Hospital” (UCL Hospital-London)
www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/gosh_families/coming_to_gosh/coping_child.html

“Preparing Your Toddler” (St. Louis Children’s Hospital)
www.stlouischildrens.org/tabid/88/itemid/150/Hospitalization--Preparing-Your-Toddler.aspx

“Preparing Your School-Age Child” (St. Louis Children’s Hospital)
www.stlouischildrens.org/tabid/88/itemid/149/Hospitalization--Preparing-Your-SchoolAge-Child.aspx

“Frequently Asked Questions and Answers for Parents” (Cincinnati Children’s Hospital)
www.cincinnatichildrens.org/visit/stay/faq

“Preparing Your Infant for Hospitalization” (University of South Carolina)
www.musckids.com/visit/prepare_infants.htm

“Needs of Hospitalized Children” (Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt)
www.vanderbiltchildrens.com/uploads/documents/Developmental_Needs_for_Hospitalized_Children.pdf

Books for Toddlers and Preschoolers

Hautzig, D., & Elliott, D. (1985). *A Visit to the Sesame Street Hospital*. New York: Random House.

Rey, A.H. (1966). *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Rogers, Fred. (1988). *Going to the Hospital*. New York: Putnam Juvenile.

Books for School-Age Children

Mayer, M. (2005). *Little Critter: My Trip to the Hospital*. New York: HarperFestival.

Bridwell, N. (2000). *Clifford Visits the Hospital*. New York: Scholastic.

Books for Adolescents

Carter, S. (2002). *Coping with a Hospital Stay*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group.

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