



How to Prepare Your Child for a Hospitalization

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When your child has a chronic illness, hospitalizations and urgent care visits may become more frequent. Feeling prepared for these medical admissions can help ease anxiety

and fear. Here are a few tips to help create a plan for your family.

Emergency Visit

Pack a bag that can easily be accessed during a medical crisis. The emergency go-bag should include extra clothes, comfort items,

small toys, activities, snacks, phone charger, medical records, emergency contacts, pen and paper. Many families leave their go-bag in their car or have a specific location within their home. It can also be helpful to leave a reminder note to grab items that may not already be packed, such as a phone, tablet, and wallet.

Additional Resources

Children's Books:

[First Time Hospital](#)

By, Jess Stockham

[Going to the Hospital](#)

By, Fred Rodgers

[Going to the Hospital...What Will I](#)

[See?](#) By, Jaynie R. Wood

[Surgery on Sunday](#) By, Kat Harrison

[Taking Your Child to the Doctor or](#)

[Hospital](#) By, Patricia Weiner

[The Hospital Bedtime Story](#)

By, Jessica Ehret



Hospital Admission

When your child has an upcoming medical procedure that will involve an overnight stay, help them feel prepared by including them. Talk to them about what they will experience in words that they can understand. It is helpful to be honest and answer their questions to the best of your knowledge.

Infants (0-12mos)

Caregivers can help their infants feel prepared by making sure they have comfort items packed, such as a soft blanket, plush toy and pacifier. Infants are able to pick up on their caregiver's emotional responses, so it's important to express confidence and security. When a caregiver is distressed, infants will also respond in a similar way. Distraction items such as bubbles, board books and singing a lullaby can help ease their fears.

Toddlers (1-3 years)

For toddlers, it's best to tell them a day before their admission. Use very simple words that they can understand. It is also recommended to incorporate medical play and items that they may see or experience. Reading books and watching short animated videos about going to the hospital can also help. Pack a bag with comfort items, small toys, and bubbles. Providing opportunities for them to make choices, will also give them a sense of control.

Preschool (3-5 years)

For preschool aged children it is helpful to tell them a few days in advance. Incorporating medical play, books, videos and even creating a short social story about what they will experience

is beneficial. Remember to use simple words that they can understand. Explain what they will experience using their five senses. For example, you will have a blood pressure cuff on your arm. It may feel like a tight hug for a few seconds. You can choose to hold my hand or pretend to blow out birthday candles.

Help your child decide what comfort items they would like to pack. If you are bringing a tablet, it may be helpful to load it with some new games or movies. If the hospital admission is for more than a few days, your child may want to pack their own pillow case, stuffed animal or blanket. It's also helpful to have a small photo album with pictures of family members and pets that your child can look at.

School Age (6-11 years)

Children who are school age should be told about the admission 5-7 days in advance. They may have more questions about the procedure, length of hospital stay, and if it will be painful. Provide them with honest information and validate their feelings. You can begin to help them communicate with their medical team and advocate for themselves. For example, "These are great questions you have. I



think you should ask the nurse or doctor at your pre-op appointment." School age children can also pack comfort items, books, tablets, headphones and music.

Teens (12-18years)

Telling teens at least a week in advance is ideal. They should have an active role in their medical care, communicating and advocating for their needs with the medical team. They may choose to pack toiletries, comfort items, tablets and a phone. It is important to provide them with privacy during their hospital admission. Having an open dialogue about when they would like you at bedside and when they need a break, should be discussed.

Shani Thornton, MS, CCLS, RWWP is a Certified Child Life Specialist and a parent of two boys. She provides child life services through her private practice, in Northern California. She supports families coping with life's challenges of illness, loss, trauma, and transitions. Through therapeutic play, creative arts, education, and emotional support, she helps children process these challenges and create a coping plan to best support their needs. She offers in-home visits, phone/virtual consultations, caregiver workshops, and support to community programs and schools. She is also a Registered Wonders & Worries Provider, serving children who have a loved one with a medical diagnosis. She published a children's preparation book, "It's Time For Your Checkup: What to expect when going to a doctor visit" and is a current Board Member of the Sacramento Chapter of California Play Therapy Association. She can be reached at ChildLifeMommy.com.