

Preparing your school age child for surgery (ages 6 to 12 years)



Children's
Healthcare of Atlanta

You can help prepare your child for surgery. Preparing ahead of time can help:

- Calm your child's fears.
- Make recovery easier and faster.
- Calm you as you focus on them, on what to expect, and on how to care for them after surgery.

What are some common fears for school age children?

Like all people, children are sometimes scared of certain things. Some common fears for school age children include:

- Being away from school and friends
- Part of their body being damaged or injured
- Being away from you and other caregivers
- Pain or the possibility of pain
- Waking up during surgery
- Loss of control
- Thinking they are in the hospital as punishment
- Needles and shots
- Dying during surgery or not waking up after surgery

How can I help prepare my child for surgery?

Talk with them

- Tell your child about the surgery 1 to 2 weeks before it happens.
- Read books to your child about the hospital or surgery. Some options are:
 - *Rita Goes to the Hospital* by Martine Davison
 - *Alfred Goes to The Hospital* by Lawrence Balter
- Let them know there is a doctor whose **only job** is to make sure your child stays asleep during surgery. The doctor is called an anesthesiologist. Also let your child know that:
 - They will not feel anything while they are asleep.
 - The doctor will stop giving anesthesia (medicine that helps them stay asleep) when the surgery is done. After this, they will wake up.
- Make sure your child understands their surgery is not a punishment. Help them understand why they need surgery.
- Let them know that many other children have had the same type of surgery.
- Offer praise, positive reinforcement and support.

Choose your words

- Explain how the surgery can help in a way that your child can understand. For example – you could say, “After your arm heals, you will be able to play basketball again.”

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Preparing your school age child for surgery, continued

- Use words they can understand. For example:
 - Instead of using the words “hurt” or “pain”, use words like “sore” or “achy”.
 - If a medicine will burn, tell them that it will feel “warm” or “different” instead of using the word “burn”.
- Have them explain back to you what will happen to make sure they understand.
- Tell the truth. Being truthful helps build trust.
 - Avoid making promises you cannot keep such as, “I promise it will not hurt.”
 - Also avoid giving untrue reasons for the hospital visit.
- If your child may be sore, tell them that they will be able to get medicine to help them feel better.

Visit the hospital

Visit the hospital before surgery if possible. The Child Life department offers tours for children older than 3 years of age.

- A tour can help your child learn about the hospital. It also gives them a chance to see the sights, sounds and events they will have the day of surgery.
- You and your child will have a chance to ask questions.
- Call 404-785-8648 to schedule a tour.

Prepare for surgery

- Give your child as many choices as possible so they feel like they have some control. For example – ask them:
 - “Which movie do you want to bring?”
 - “Do you want to sit on your bed or in the chair while we wait?”
- Let your child know you will:
 - Wait close by during their surgery.
 - See them when they get to their room.
- It is normal for some children to get mad, tearful or quiet in the hospital. They may act younger than their age. Most often, these behaviors improve after the stress of surgery has passed.
- Be patient, and treat your child as normally as possible.

Take care of yourself

- Make sure you know about your child’s surgery and what to expect. This can help decrease your fears.
- Make sure that you, your child and your family are well rested.
- Take care of yourself. Your child can sense and react to your stress level.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child’s doctor or a member of your child’s healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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