

12 Tips to Prepare Your Child for a Hospital Stay

An upcoming hospital stay is nerve-racking for everyone: parents, caregivers, children and siblings. Taking care of everything and everyone can often feel overwhelming, if not impossible.

While you may feel alone, you aren't the first parent to struggle with figuring out what the right next step is or how to prepare your child for a hospital stay. So we hope you'll consider these tips as you move forward, many of which came from parents and caregivers who know what you're going through.

Help Your Child Understand What They're Facing

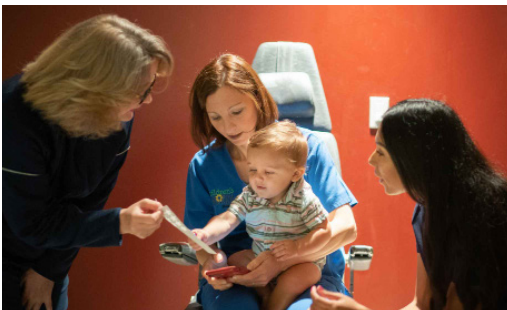
The best thing you can do for your child in advance of their hospital visit is to give them information about what they're facing. This includes both the reason why they're going to the hospital and what their stay will look like.

Talk about what your child will experience with the doctors and nurses. Discuss their procedures. What will it be like to go through surgery? Who will they need to talk to every day?

“Be truthful with them about procedures, such as blood draws and IV starts; please don't tell them that it won't hurt!”
–Anne-Leigh S.

Also, discuss what your child will experience from a social and emotional perspective. What will their days and nights look like? Who will be with them? The more information you can share, the more your child will be mentally prepared for their stay.

Share Age-Appropriate Information



How much you share with your child is dependent upon how old they are. And how you share depends on how your child learns. For instance, you can ask your child's doctor or child life specialist for age-appropriate book recommendations that you can read with your child.



Or you may consider watching educational videos together. If you have a younger child, look to cartoons and other kid-friendly shows for insights, like this mom did:

“When my son was little, we watched all the Sesame Street videos, including “Big Bird Visits the Hospital.” When he unexpectedly had to spend a night in hospital, he knew something about it & was less frightened. Expose your kids to lots of books, videos and experiences. You never know what life will bring.” –Patricia A.

If your child is a pre-teen or teenager, go deeper with the information you provide. Kids in this age group are more mature and interested in the reality they're facing. Encourage them to watch informational videos from the hospital and reliable sources on YouTube. Of course, watch with them whenever you can and be prepared to answer their questions.

Answer Your Child's Questions Honestly

Your child will likely have many questions as you discuss their upcoming visit. As their most trusted ally in this situation, be sure to answer their questions honestly.

A word of caution: You may find yourself wanting to sugarcoat the situation for your child. Don't give in to this temptation.

Hiding the truth or making things seem better than they really are often only makes a situation worse. It also may cause your child to stop trusting you if things don't go the way you've described.

“Medicine is not candy. Help them be brave and educate them.” –Tessica T.

Encourage Your Child to Be Their Best Advocate

If your child is old enough, teach them to be their own advocate. Give them a small journal or pocket notebook so they can write down any thoughts and questions that come to mind regarding their care.

Encourage your child to only write one question per page. This will allow them to quickly look through the journal to see if any questions remain unanswered. Make sure they take their journal with them when they head to the hospital so they can continue using it during their stay.

Help Your Child Pack



Bedding is a top recommendation from parents and caregivers, alike. This makes sense, as your child is used to having their pillow, blankets and other comfort items with them every day. Additionally, these items smell like home, which helps limit feelings of homesickness.

In addition to bedding, consider bringing a photo album or scrapbook with pictures of family and pets in it. Keep germs at bay by laminating the pictures or pages.

Additional items we recommend packing for your child's hospital stay include:

- A robe and slippers
- A stuffed animal or another comfort item
- A favorite toy or two
- Board or card games
- Books to read
- Activity and coloring books
- Tablets or smartphones (plus chargers and extension cords!)

Schedule a Hospital Tour

If possible, schedule a tour of the hospital in advance. This will help alleviate some of the unknown and the fears that come along with them as you prepare your child for their hospital stay.

“When my kids were little, they could visit the hospital before they were scheduled for a procedure. They could even go into surgery and see all the equipment etc. for ‘surprise’ visits.”

–Roberta B.

Note: Scheduling a hospital tour during COVID-19 times may be difficult. If you cannot visit in person, see if the hospital's website offers virtual tours.

Manage Your Emotions & Behavior Around Your Child

As your child prepares for their hospital stay, they'll look to you to determine how they should react to their current situation. According to HealthyChildren.org, “Children learn by watching everyone around them, especially their parents. When you use manners and good coping strategies, you teach your children to do the same.”

Keep in mind that your child isn't just watching and mirroring your positive behaviors or emotions. They're also watching and imitating the negative. Be careful how you allow your fear, anxiety and stress to show up.

This isn't to say that you should hide your emotions from your child. That will only encourage them to hide theirs. Instead, do as this caregiver suggests:

“Just be matter of fact, truthful, empathetic and don't let yourself channel drama and anxiety.” –Dorothy D.

Learn Good Coping Strategies

When it comes to modeling good behavior, you'll want to identify potential coping strategies that will help you and your child deal with stress and anxiety. Some good coping strategies include:

- Meditation
- Deep breathing
- Visualization
- Yoga
- Journaling
- Exercise

Talking with others also helps alleviate stress and feelings of isolation. Turn to a few select friends or family members who can talk to you and your child about what you're experiencing.

Practice Self-Care

Managing stress is one of the most important things you can do for yourself and your child. But that shouldn't be the only thing you do for yourself during this time.

As a parent, it's likely you push aside your own needs and emotions in favor of your child's. But you cannot be your best self for your child if you don't help yourself. You must bake in time every day for self-care.

Here are a few of our favorite self-care tips for caregivers:

- Prioritize nutrition
- Keep a gratitude journal
- Make time for your hobbies
- Exercise
- Be kind to yourself

We understand that this can seem like a nearly impossible task when you have so much else going on. To make more time, consider starting a free CaringBridge site. You can use the Planner to easily coordinate care needs, and loved ones can comment much-needed support on your journal entries.

To learn more or start a site today visit:
www.caringbridge.org/pediatric



Create Moments of Joy

While we understand how challenging this time can be, try to build in moments of joy for your child in the days leading up to and throughout their hospital stay. A common recommendation on how to do this involves gift-giving:

“Wrap little gifts for each day they are in the hospital. Give one gift a day. When the child comes home have a larger gift for them to unwrap.” –Sandy B.

Additional day brighteners include:

- Greeting cards
- Flowers
- Video messages

Finding ways to bring a smile to your child's face during this time will lift their spirits—and yours.

Include Siblings As Much As Possible

If you have more than one child, keep in mind that siblings will be feeling a variety of emotions during this time. Some of those emotions may include:

- Fear
- Loss of sense of self
- Loss of routine
- Guilt
- Resentment
- Neglect

To help siblings work through all they're feeling and thinking, include them in as many of the preparations as possible.

- Engage siblings in conversations about the hospital stay.
- Encourage them to ask their own questions.
- Let them help you and their sibling pack for the stay.
- Bring them along for the hospital tour and visits, if possible.

Also, schedule one-on-one time with siblings so they get exclusive time focused on the things they enjoy and care about.

Be Present

Above all else, remain in the moment with your child. As this parent recommends:

“Be truthful, try to answer all questions, but most of all love and be beside them.” –Delores B.

While you may feel the need to actively do something to help your child, what often brings the most comfort is simply being present. Sit with your child, actively listen to whatever they have to say, read to them and stay with them overnight.

In the end, your presence is what matters the most when figuring out how to prepare your child for a hospital stay.

CaringBridge is a global, nonprofit social network dedicated to helping family and friends communicate with and support loved ones during a health journey. We offer free, personal, protected websites for people to easily share updates and receive strength and encouragement from their community. This article was pulled from our families' insights in collaboration with experts.

To learn more or start a site today visit: www.caringbridge.org/pediatric

