

# How to Prepare Your Child for Surgery

If your child has an upcoming surgery, it may be difficult to know how to tell them about it and help them through it. As a parent, it may be hard for you to cope with this entire process, as well.

We walk through how to prepare children for surgery, as well as tips to cope with the procedure as a parent. Read on to find out more:

## Explaining Surgery to Your Child

When your child is scheduled to have surgery, it's understandable that both you and your child may be nervous about the upcoming procedure. It's normal to have questions about the process, and what they (and you) should expect.

A great first step is consulting your hospital's child life specialists or nurse. They are trained to help explain technical medical language to kids and prepare them for procedures.

Here are a few additional tips for explaining surgery to your child:

### Use Simple, Easy to Understand Language

When you're speaking to your child about their upcoming surgery, it's important to understand they might be just as scared as you are.

Medical treatments and surgical procedures to them may sound like big, scary words. Because of this, using simple language and wording is essential.

Try "the doctors are going to fix your \_\_\_\_ right up!" rather than detailed explanations about the procedure. Positive shifts like these can decrease anxiety surrounding the situation for both your child and yourself. Let them know you'll be there every step of the way.

**Note:** A common phrase that may be worth avoiding is "put you to sleep." This could have a negative effect, depending on whether or not your child has had a pet put to sleep that didn't come home afterwards.

“Be gentle, but honest. Give lots of hugs and kisses before, and after. Let them know how much you love them and don't show your worry to them. Try to show bravery. You have time to freak while they are going through it. Just be honest, but most of all let them feel your love.” –Patty B.



## Use Books and Stories to Create a Positive Environment

Another way to talk to your child about their surgery is to read to them or tell them stories. Try books about doctors or about going to the hospital. This can make the process of arriving at the hospital, meeting the doctors and entering the operating room less stressful for your child – they can associate it to a positive memory or a story where everything was good in the end.

If your child is at an age where you can speak to them about what the surgery will be like – try having them explain it back to you, or to create a story where the main person has to have the same surgery, too. This tactic can help your child feel more at ease, knowing how their surgery will happen and understanding the process as best they can.

## Let Your Child Be a Part of the Process

Some children may feel like they're losing their sense of control – especially if the hospital environment is unfamiliar to them. Involve your child in the decision-making process where appropriate – for example, their hospital bag.

What goes inside? Aside from the must-haves, allow them to choose a favorite book or toy, maybe a favorite clothing item or even their pillow. Small choices like these can help your child regain their sense of control and feel more confident going into surgery.



## Helping Your Child Throughout the Process

Each child is different, and the level of support they need can change over time. Here are a few places to begin when it comes to helping your child throughout the surgery process:

## Before Surgery

The age of your child will influence how and when you should begin to prepare them (mentally and emotionally) for their surgery. General guidelines for when to tell them are as follows:

- Toddlers: Day in advance
- Preschoolers: 3-5 days in advance
- School-aged: 1 week in advance
- Teenagers: When the procedure has been decided upon

When you tell them, ease it gently into the conversation and try to answer any questions they might have.

On the day of your child's surgery, your son or daughter might be a little anxious. Ease their nerves by providing a supportive environment with plenty of reassurance and a strong hand to hold. If you're allowed to go into the operating room with them before they're put under anesthesia, sometimes all they need to feel at ease is a warm, familiar face looking back at them.

## During Surgery

Time spent in the waiting room can go by slowly – but it doesn't have to. If it's a shorter surgery, try finding something productive to fill the time – like a portable task that you've been putting off that doesn't require intense thought. For example, if you have a backlog of appointments you've been meaning to make, or a good friend you haven't called in a while.

If it's a longer operation, make sure to keep your self-care in check, and eat and sleep when you can. You can't take care of your child post-operation if you're not taking care of you.

## After Surgery

Ask your facility when you'll be able to see your son or daughter after the surgery has finished. When they begin to wake up, seeing you there will make it seem as though you were there during the entire procedure – and may provide a strong sense of comfort for your child as they take in their surroundings.

It's normal for them to be in a little bit of pain, or perhaps hungry, confused, thirsty or anxious. However, trust that the medical staff there will know how to help your child feel better after they've come out of anesthesia.

Finally, talk with your medical team about what post-procedure care will look like. Will there be any bandages to change? Foods to avoid? Symptoms or warning signs to watch for? Gathering all the info before you head home from the hospital can help you feel more prepared.

## How Parents Can Cope

Having a child undergo surgery is hard on you as a parent, too. Here are a few ways to cope:



## Mentally Prepare Yourself

When your child goes into surgery, it's perfectly normal to be feeling nervous or scared. To make this (and the waiting process) a bit easier, read up on the procedure itself as well as the hospital in which it is taking place. What are the facilities like? What are the staff like? What can you expect during the preoperative and postoperative process?

Having a mental 'game plan' of what to expect may alleviate some of the stress and uncertainty.

## Ask Questions

Having a child undergoing a surgical procedure can be overwhelming, especially if it's the first time it's happened, or it's a major surgery. One of the best ways to regain a sense of control is to seek answers to any questions you may have.

Ask your child's medical team about the procedure itself, what happens before/during/after, and what to expect post-operation. Sometimes knowing the details about your son or daughter's surgery can provide a sense of comfort, and can help you as a parent know what to expect and cope with the situation at hand.

## Take Care of Yourself

Even if it might be the last thing on your mind – you need to take care of yourself when your child is having surgery. This can include things like:

- Continuing to eat as you normally would (tip: pack healthy snacks for the hospital)
- Get as much sleep as you can
- Read a book to take your mind off things
- Deep breaths to calm your nervous system

## Pack Your Own Hospital Bag

Aside from snacks, packing your own hospital bag is just as important as having your child's ready to go. Bring some extra clothing for yourself – some parents have said that they'd been puked on (nausea from coming out of anesthesia) or bled on (child took out their own IV). And sometimes, it's just nice to put on fresh clothes.

If you feel like you'll want to shower at the hospital, it also might be a good idea to bring a pair of flip flops to avoid direct contact with bathroom floors.

CaringBridge can be a wonderful resource to keep track of your thoughts and keep everyone in the loop. Many people with children going through a surgical procedure often say that it would be a huge comfort if they could receive help with food, day to day chores, transport between appointments or even finances.

A free CaringBridge site makes it easy to request help when you need it, and it also allows your support group and your community to be there for you when you most need it.

To learn more or start a site today visit:

[www.caringbridge.org/pediatric](http://www.caringbridge.org/pediatric)



## Sally's Story

"Preparing your child for surgery is not an easy thing to do. From their perspective, if they've never had any kind of surgery before, there is no way they can fully understand it, so keep it as simple as you can.

Tell them you will be with them when they go to sleep, and also when they wake up. Tell them when they wake up, it will be all done. Depending what kind of surgery it is and how old your child is, let them know what is going to happen during surgery, so they know what to expect afterwards.

When my son Vincent had to have a leg amputation surgery, we told him that when he wakes up, his leg will look different, and will be shorter. Give them some reasons as to why this surgery is going to help them, and all the fun things they will be able to do afterwards. If they are old enough to understand, let them know there might be some pain afterwards, but there is medicine for that.

You are their biggest advocate, so make sure your child knows how to communicate things to you. Be positive and courageous, and your child will feed off that energy. And pray hard." –**Sally Lynick, mother of Vincent.**

Surgery can be scary – especially if it's for your child. But the most important thing to remember is that your child is not alone when they are wheeled into the operating room. In fact, they've got a team of people that are on their side, yourself included.

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](http://www.caringbridge.org/pediatric)

