

# Preparing Your Child for Surgery

## WHAT ARE SOME COMMON FEARS AND STRESSORS RELATED TO SURGERY AND HOSPITALIZATION?

- Staying in an unfamiliar room/bed
- Contact with many unfamiliar people
- Disrupted routine
- Unfamiliar auditory and visual stimuli
- Pain/medical procedures
- Separation from parents/home
- Loss of control
- Being away from school/friends
- Fear of waking up during surgery
- Fear of surgery/risks of surgery
- Fear of dying

## WHAT ARE SOME WAYS TO PREPARE YOUR CHILD FOR SURGERY AND TREATMENT?

### Explain what will happen in developmentally appropriate terms.

Be honest but appropriate. Be clear and specific about the reason for surgery and use terms that your child can understand. For example, “This surgery will help you to run and play” or “The doctor will make your leg longer so that you won’t have to wear a special shoe.” You might have to explain things several times and in several different ways for your child to fully understand. For younger children, use play (e.g., doctor’s kits, stuffed animals), photographs/drawings, and books. Try to explain to your child what he or she will see and hear in the hospital. Reassure younger children that the surgery is not a punishment and that they did not do anything to cause the surgery. Provide opportunities for your child to explain the surgery and treatment to friends and family members. This provides you with an opportunity to check his or her understanding and to address any misconceptions.



### Encourage your child to ask questions and to express his or her feelings about surgery.

Validate your child’s feelings by letting him or her know that it is OK to feel nervous or scared and that it is OK to cry. Your child might be reluctant to ask questions. An older child can be encouraged to make a list of questions to ask the doctor during the preoperative visit.

### Ask for a tour of the hospital and to speak with current patients.

The pediatric liaison can provide a tour of the pediatric unit, physical therapy gyms, and other areas of the hospital that your child will see during his or her hospitalization. In addition, meetings with current patients and families can also be arranged so that your child’s questions and concerns can be addressed. Seeing the hospital and talking to current patients can greatly reduce anxiety that is related to surgery and treatment.



### Develop “coping plans” for situations/procedures that cause fear or anxiety.

For example, if your child is afraid of the pain after surgery, make a “Pain Plan” in which you and your child identify things that will help him or her to feel more comfortable (e.g., distracting activities, listening to music). This helps to foster a sense of control and reduces anxiety.

**Encourage your child to bring “comfort” items and fun activities from home.**

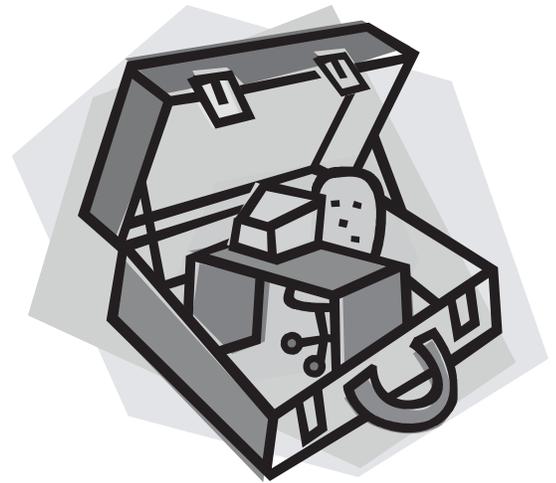
Encourage your child to help pack his or her suitcase for surgery and to include items that will help make the hospital more “home-like” (e.g., pillow, stuffed animals, photos of family members, friends, or pets). Also, encourage your child to bring fun, distracting activities/toys that will help him or her to cope with pain and anxiety after surgery (e.g., games, movies, music).

**Try to arrange ways for your child to remain in contact with peers during hospitalization and treatment.**

Come to the hospital prepared with phone cards, postcards, or stamps so that your child is able to keep in contact with family and friends. Encourage other family members and friends to call, e-mail, text, and mail cards/letters during hospitalization and treatment. If you are from out of state, provide your child’s school/teacher with a street/e-mail address so that classmates can keep in touch. Also, consider developing a CarePage ([www.carepages.com/sinai-balt](http://www.carepages.com/sinai-balt)). This is an online, hospital-supported service that provides families with an easy way to update other family members and friends about the patient’s status. Wireless Internet access is available on the pediatric unit for those with laptops or other devices.

**Prepare yourself.**

Learn all that you can about your child’s surgery and treatment. If you have any questions or concerns, call the treatment team for clarification. Your child’s anxiety will increase if he or she senses that you are also anxious. Try to remain calm even if you don’t feel calm! Arrange for support and help from others in advance. It will be important for you to allow yourself opportunities to take breaks and to have some “adult” time after surgery and during the treatment process.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT OUR PEDIATRIC LIAISON, MARILYN RICHARDSON:**

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