



Communicating with children having vaccination.

How to stay calm and empower children

Thank you for taking the time to develop your skills in delivering vaccinations to children in ways that can minimise anxiety and distress for children and the health practitioner.

We acknowledge your skills and abilities in providing vaccination and know you can bring those skills to children. There is significant overlap in your current skills and the skills needed to help children.

There are some underlying principles that ensure these guidelines will significantly help many children (and adults).

- Children have resources and capabilities in many areas even though they may think they don't at times of stress.
- Children have amazing imaginations that can both make them more anxious and help them to cope with vaccination.
- The way we talk about and around vaccination can have powerful influence on children's perception of their experience.
- The way every individual perceives or thinks about things is determined by many factors such as previous experience, their personality, beliefs, family beliefs.

Bringing their resources together with imaginative distraction can lead to a more helpful perception of reality – such that they can have a vaccination more comfortably than they may have expected.

Using communication and imagination to better manage vaccination allows the child to build on their resource and take their positive experience into other areas of their life.

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Develop Trust and Build Rapport.

- Talk mainly to the child whilst acknowledging the parents. This is empowering for the child. For teenagers – don't be bothered by whatever outward appearance or attitudes they display – underneath they are all good kids!
- Ask their name and introduce yourself and your role. This establishes expectations.
- When they tell you their name, ask their permission to call them by that name. Explain that you will be taking care of them and helping them to have a vaccination safely and comfortably.
 - *"Would it be ok if I call you, that's great. My name is, I'm going to look after you and help you have the vaccination safely and comfortably."*
- Ask them what their favourite things are – everyone has some favourite things and nearly all kids like to talk about themselves when asked. This may feel awkward at first but kids and their parents love being asked and it can immediately jolt them out of their fixation on the vaccination.
- Explore the 'favourite thing' they seem most engaged in or the thing that makes them smile. Find out about all the details, who, where, when, how, why etc. Then keep this conversation going throughout your entire interaction. Be an interested and inquisitive observer – this not only distracts them but puts them in a good place.
- If they are upset, distressed or angry **listen** to their story and acknowledge their distress – **accepting** this as their perception of whatever is going on - including that a vaccine is scary, painful. "I can see you are concerned – that's pretty normal."
- Then offer them a way to cope "would it be ok if I show a really good way to do this comfortably and safely", "I do this all the time and we have some great ways to help you manage this" "Is that OK?" .



2. Talking about vaccination.

Avoid negative suggestions.

Negative suggestions are words or comments that give a negative expectation.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ For example - we suggest you don't say <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "just a little <i>sting</i>" • "that's the <i>worst</i> bit" • "don't <i>worry</i>" • "<i>just</i> relax" • <i>needle</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Instead, you could say <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "is it OK if we finish now?" • "you are doing really well – we are almost finished" • "can I show you how to feel calmer" • "is it ok, if I show you how to manage this comfortably" • The vaccination (instead of needle) |
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If they ask - "will it ***sting***?" You can say something like – *"I'm not sure, some people barely notice it, others tell me it just a sensation and if anything bothers you could give me a loud cough and wiggle your toes knowing it is nearly finished."*

We really don't know what they will feel, so giving an open-ended answer is appropriate. If we tell them it stings – then it probably will, because we give them a suggestion that it will and that is accepted and then experienced. What is important is giving them a way to cope and all the other aspects of care – trust, distraction, good communication and good clinical care.

Other words to avoid

- **TRY** – asking kids to try their best or to try and keep still does the opposite. TRY gives the message it's ok to fail at what we ask.

Instead – use CAN.

"You can do this, you are doing great, we are almost finished"

- **DON'T** – *when we ask kids to not do something, they have to think of that something first. Try not to think of a pink elephant...*
- *It is more effective to ask them to do what you want, not what you don't want.*

Rather than saying "***don't move***", you can ask them to "***stay still***".



Give helpful positive suggestions.

Suggestions are often accepted unconsciously when children are anxious or distressed. So instead of negative suggestions we can give positive helpful suggestions throughout the interaction.

- **Can you tell me more about the favourite activity?**
Ask about where, how, when, who as there, the best time etc etc.
Aiming to focus them and take their attention from the vaccination.
- You **can** keep that arm still and that really helps you to **be comfortable**.
- *You've done it. Well done. We've finished. The really cool thing is when you can do this once, you can keep being able to do this, once you learn it your mind knows what to do. Well done!*

3. Using children's abilities and resources – even when they think they can't do something.

Asking about favourite things is the easiest way to find their resources and to empower them by imagining they are doing the activity and being in the safe place.

If you are struggling to find their favourites, ask about –

- "do you have any favourite foods?"
And then explore that, recall when you ate that and compare notes etc etc.
- "do you have a favourite sport"
- "what's your favourite thing at school"

You are probably getting the picture – by exploring their favourite things you can distract them, by going into the details you can shift their attention away from the vaccination. By getting them to re-live their good memories you can start to dissociate them from the vaccination and fire up their good emotional states and resources which empower them to manage a vaccination.



4. Staying Calm

Most kids are a bit anxious and will be able to manage. Much like you and me?

Some kids may be very anxious and may even be having a panic attack. Once they are in this anxious state they have fired off their amygdala which in turn activates their adrenal glands to release adrenaline and you see the physiological effects of adrenaline which is preparing them for ***fight, flight or freeze***. Adrenaline only lasts for a few minutes and during that time most kids won't respond to rational conversation and can't think normally. Here are 2 simple techniques to help them to be calm.

- Model calm with your own voice and body language.
- Safety suggestions and controlled breathing.

“you are safe, we will be looking after you, I'd like you to slow your breathing and simply let things so slow down. I'm going to breath with you, like this

- Slow, strong breath in and hold for 3 seconds – great
- Hold, hold, and now breath out for 7 seconds – slowly, slowly – you are doing great
- Now, I'd like you to hold for 3 seconds and then take a strong deep breath – breathing in strength and calm – hold for 3 seconds
- Now, this time when you breath out, I'd like you to blow away your fears and concerns...

Repeat.

5. Use a 'double bind question' to improve compliance.

Many parents use this simple technique to improve compliance with eating vegetables, brushing teeth etc. It's also called an illusion of comparable alternatives.

By giving children a choice in how they have their vaccination they can accept that they are having the vaccination.

“when you have the vaccination, would you like me to use the right or the left arm?”

“when we're making sure you are comfortable, would you like to squeeze mum's right hand or her left hand?”



6. Further reading and resources

These techniques outlined above can be used routinely – with relaxed kids, mild anxiety, and fearful kids.

- Relaxed kids find this helpful and entertaining. Life is an adventure, and you are helping them. We also get good practise at the language and techniques.
- Mildly anxious kids really benefit. You gain their trust and offer them ways to stay calm and ways to cope. This is empowering for them and teaches them useful skills for the procedure and for the future.
- Fearful kids can also really benefit. Some fearful kids may need more work with these techniques and kids that really struggle may need additional help.

Resources for health practitioners and parents.

From USA based clinical psychologist Dr Jody Thomas

- <https://www.megfoundationforpain.org/teens-and-tweens>
- <http://imagination.stanford.edu/>

Watch the video “You are the Boss of your Brain”: <https://youtu.be/UbK9FFoAcvs>

Find the last section – “I want to feel calm during procedures and pokes”

From the EPIC (Effective Peri-Procedural Communication) group with SPANZA (the Society for Paediatric Anaesthesia NZ and Australia.)

- www.epickids.org.au

Read: [“How to talk to kids about medical procedures” information sheet.](#)