



How to Talk to Kids About Medical Procedures

Kids look to you, their caregiver, for information about the world. The way that you communicate to your child about their procedure will shape their experience.

Your child is going to have a medical procedure. What's the best way to prepare them?

Children often have little ability to understand why a procedure is needed. They will look to you, their caregiver, to 'get a feel' for what this encounter will be like.

What to do and what not to do:



Do's

- Do be positive
- Do model a calm, matter-of-fact approach
- Do let your kids talk to the staff
- Do use distraction and other fun stuff
- Do explain it's not rude to ignore the procedure
- Do be honest
- Do have a little fun afterwards



Don'ts

- Don't use medical procedures as a punishment
- Don't reward children for being 'brave'
- Don't use the word 'brave'
- Don't spend too long discussing the procedure
- Don't reassure
- Don't use negative words like 'hurt'
- Don't use words like 'won't' and 'don't'



Do's and Don'ts



Do

- Be positive about the procedure, and about medical care in general
 - Explain that it is to help them (get better or stay healthy and strong)
 - Use only **positive** language (eg words like cool, fun, amazing, comfortable)
 - Keep your 'non-verbal communication', your facial expression and tone of voice, positive, **calm** and matter-of-fact
- Allow the medical staff to chat to your child, don't answer questions for them. The staff are asking your child questions to help develop a positive relationship with them
- Use **distractions** - this is one time that being on a screen can be very useful! Perhaps allow them to watch a favourite movie or play a favourite game
- Explain that it's not rude to ignore the procedure if they want, medical staff are happy if your child is busy doing something else
- Be honest about what is going to happen, never lie- children can very rapidly lose trust in caregivers when lied to
- Have a fun experience or a treat afterwards (but nothing over the top or it can give kids the impression that what they went through was a big deal)



Don't

- Use medical procedures as a threat or punishment
- Reward children for being 'brave'
- Use the word 'brave' - this communicates to children that what they're being 'brave' about is scary or bad
- Spend a long time talking to your child about the procedure, or discuss it often. Think about how you would prepare them for a trip to a new adventure park and keep your tone of voice and the amount of discussion about the same
- Tell children that, 'it's going to be OK' or say, 'don't worry'. Reassurances can actually have the opposite effect and give the message that there's something to worry about.
- Use negative words like 'hurt', 'pain', 'sick', 'sore'. We need to make a conscious effort here. Even if we say something like, 'this **won't** hurt', the negative, 'hurt' word can actually have the effect of suggesting that they *will* feel that way, that it *will* actually hurt
- Use words like won't and don't (they are often followed by negative words, e.g. 'won't hurt' or don't worry')

Examples of how to Prepare your Child for a Medical Procedure

It's important to keep the ideas and words appropriate for your child's age

6 year old Ella needs to have a blood test to check her iron levels. Mum is planning to take her tomorrow.

'Guess what Ella! Tomorrow, we're going to have a fun morning. Instead of going to school at 9 like we normally do, we're going to go to this cool place where they can take some blood out of your arm and look at it to make sure you're really healthy. You sit on my lap and hold your hand out like this and then the nurse will take some blood out of here. It's pretty cool because you get to play Minecraft while it's happening. It's funny because it's actually OK to just ignore the nurse while she's doing the blood test and pay attention to other stuff. After it's done we're going to go and get a doughnut! What flavour doughnut are you going to have?

4 year old Marley is due for his vaccinations.

Hey Marley, tomorrow we are going to go and get your special four year old injections. Injections are amazing, they're a medicine that keeps you healthy and strong. It's not a medicine you drink, it actually goes in here (*points to upper arm*). We get to go to the doctor's and a really nice nurse there gives you the injection.

It goes like this. Come here teddy (parent takes Marley's teddy), sit on my lap. Marley, can you be the nurse? Marley, this pen looks a bit like an injection, you can hold it. Here's a lollipop for you to give teddy after the injection, it's pretty cool that after injections you get a lollipop.

So, I'll cuddle teddy and lift up his sleeve a bit. Teddy, you can play with my phone during the injection, what do you want to watch? Marley, you get the pen and pop it onto his arm up here near his shoulder while teddy is watching Paw Patrol. That's perfect Marley, you're a great nurse. Don't forget to give him the lollipop! Oh Teddy, that's your favourite flavour. Don't forget to say 'thank you' teddy!

So tomorrow, teddy will come with us and afterwards we're going to go to the park, how cool is that? What park do you want to go to?



Examples of how to Prepare your Child for a Medical Procedure (cont.)

10 year old Maya is having a flu vaccination tomorrow. She comes home from school and says to her dad that, 'Sonia told me she had one last week and it really hurt!'

It's important to be honest, so your child knows they can trust what you tell them.

Everyone experiences medical procedures differently. If your child asks what it will feel like or whether it will hurt, don't try to guess what it will feel like for them.

Use positive language and keep in mind that your child may not feel very much. Explain that anything they do feel doesn't need to bother them. A useful answer to this can be something like, 'it feels different to everyone, many kids are surprised by how quick and easy it is'. Here's an example.

That's interesting Maya, Sonia said that, for her, it really hurt. The thing is, everyone feels stuff differently. Like, Sonia loves eating bananas but you hate bananas. You love having your hair cut and Sonia hates it. And some people love having their hair cut sometimes but sometimes they hate it, it can be different every time. So Sonia said it really hurt but we don't know what it will be like for you. I do know a lot of kids are surprised at how quick and easy it is and if you do feel anything then it doesn't need to bother you. If you like, you can watch YouTube on my phone while it happens, what do you want to watch? It's quite amazing that while you're watching something you like, you won't notice that arm very much. What's the best thing you've seen on YouTube?

**Answer any questions honestly, keeping in mind the Dos and Don'ts!
This will be enough preparation for many children.**