



How to Help...Your Preschool-Age Child in the Hospital

The preschool years are ones of imagination and cooperative play. The preschooler's independence continues to increase as their frustration level decreases. It is an exciting time for a child as they acquire an increased vocabulary and understanding of events. Role-playing is important as the preschooler learns about their experiences through play. Play also serves as the great "normalizer" of the environment. Even though ill or injured, being able to play helps the child by incorporating a familiar daily task into a not so typical environment. There may instances where the preschooler has a difficult time differentiating reality from fantasy, which may increase fears relating to the hospital environment. It is not uncommon at this stage to see children move backwards in their development while coping with a traumatic experience. It is not unusual that the last learned skill, such as toileting, fades away during hospitalization.

Below are some ways to help support your preschool-age child

- Provide the staff with the words your child uses for familiar objects.
- Provide honest explanations of hospitalization and procedures.
- Encourage your child's participation in play activities, such as imaginary play, reading, coloring and music.
- Use daily events rather than time to explain when to expect certain events, i.e. before lunch or after bath.
- Offer age appropriate and reasonable choices to your child to provide some control, i.e. would you like to look at books or color a picture.
- Bring a few of your child's favorite and familiar items from home.
- Give your child the opportunity to talk about his/her feelings and fears.
- Encourage your child to still do their own basic care such as brushing their teeth or feeding themselves.
- Continue, as best as possible, your home routine.
- Always let your child know if you must leave and when you plan to return.
- Provide consistent boundaries and limits as predictability will help your child feel safe.
- Use techniques to help your child focus on something pleasant or comforting during events that create anxiety.
- When possible, let your child know about procedures and other hospital experiences about 30 minutes in advance. This will give time for your child to process.
- Lying down flat during a procedure may feel vulnerable and unnatural. Ask your nurse or doctor if your child can sit up during the procedure. Please ask for *Comfort Holding Techniques* handout or ask to speak with a Child Life Specialist for ideas on how to best support your child during a procedure.