

Ten Tips to Help Your Child Cope with Surgery (aged 3-6)

- 1.) **Tell the truth.** As parents we often feel it is best to avoid telling our children the truth about having surgery because we don't want to scare them. However, it is crucial to develop a trusting relationship with your child by telling them the truth. If your child becomes upset by what you have said, take this opportunity to help them identify ways they can cope with their fears.
- 2.) **Tell them what they need to know.** Younger children do not need to know the details of their surgery. You should tell them about what they will see, feel, and hear, and generalize what will happen when they are asleep for surgery (ex: "While the special medicine is helping you sleep, the doctor is going to help your ears work better.")
- 3.) **Make a coping plan.** Help your child problem solve ways to deal with their fears so that they feel more relaxed. For example, if your child is worried about leaving you to go into the operating room, help them chose a special item to bring in to the operating room to keep them comforted.
- 4.) **Talk about the sleep medicine.** Reinforce that this is a special kind of medicine that people can only get in the hospital which helps them to fall asleep so they can have surgery. Tell them that this is a special sleep that is like no other, during which time they will not feel, hear or see anything, and they will stop receiving the medicine once their surgery is over. Avoid using the term, "Putting you to sleep," as children may associate this with euthanizing a pet.
- 5.) **Address your own fears away from your child.** It is normal to be nervous, however if you show your nerves, your child will be nervous. Address your own fears with someone you trust before talking with your child about theirs so that you can be the pillar of support that they need.
- 6.) **Listen to what they are saying.** Some children will use their words, some will show you through their play, and some will alter their behaviour. These are all ways that your child is trying to communicate with you. Listen to what they have to say and validate their concerns.
- 7.) **Clarify any misunderstandings.** Children often misunderstand what they have heard or overheard. If your child has a misunderstanding, provide them with accurate, age appropriate information about their surgery.
- 8.) **Make the time.** Children work on their own schedules. Most likely you will be focused on something else when your child is ready to talk about their surgery. Try to take the time to listen to them when they are ready to talk about their feelings.
- 9.) **Remind them about surgery.** Remind your child the evening before surgery that they are going to the hospital the following day. Help your child pack a bag of their favorite things to take with them to the hospital and talk with them about their feelings. If you have developed a coping plan to address their fears, review the coping plan again and practice the coping steps.
- 10.) **The Day of Surgery.** Remember that crying and being afraid are normal reactions. Continue to remind your child of their coping plan and how proud you are of them for being brave (please remember that being brave does not mean withholding tears).

Ten Tips to Help Your Child Cope with Surgery (aged 7-12)

- 1.) **Tell the truth.** As parents we often feel it is best to avoid telling our children the truth about having surgery because we don't want to scare them. However, it is crucial to develop a trusting relationship with your child by telling them the truth. If your child becomes upset by what you have said, take this opportunity to help them identify ways they can cope with their fears.
- 2.) **Tell them what they need to know.** Older children may want more details about their surgery. If they ask you for these, be honest and try to use non-threatening words such as "make a small opening," rather than, "cut you open," and reinforce that they will be asleep at this time and unable to feel anything.
- 3.) **Make a coping plan.** Help your child problem solve ways to deal with their fears so that they feel more relaxed. For example, if your child is afraid of the needle used for IV anesthesia, practice taking deep breaths together and remind them they will have numbing cream on their hand to help with the pinch.
- 4.) **Talk about the sleep medicine.** Reinforce that this is a special sleep that is like no other, during which time they cannot feel, hear or see anything, and they will stop receiving the medicine once their surgery is over. Avoid using the term, "Putting you to sleep," as children may associate this with euthanizing a pet.
- 5.) **Address your own fears away from your child.** It is normal to be nervous, however if you show your nerves, your child will be nervous. Address your own fears with someone you trust before talking with your child about theirs so that you can be the pillar of support that they need.
- 6.) **Listen to what they are saying.** Some children will use their words, some will show you through their play, and some will alter their behaviour. These are all ways that your child is trying to communicate with you. Listen to what they have to say and validate their concerns.
- 7.) **Clarify any misunderstandings.** Children often misunderstand what they have heard or overheard about their surgery. If your child has a misunderstanding, provide them with accurate, age appropriate information about their surgery.
- 8.) **Make the time.** Children work on their own schedules. Most likely you will be focused on something else when your child is ready to talk about their surgery. Try to take the time to listen to them when they are ready to talk about their feelings.
- 9.) **Remind them about surgery.** Remind your child that they are having surgery a few days before it is scheduled. The night before surgery, help your child pack a bag of their favorite things to take with them to the hospital and talk with them about their feelings. If you have developed a coping plan to address their fears, review the coping plan again and practice the coping steps.
- 10.) **The Day of Surgery.** Remember that crying and being afraid are normal reactions for children and youth. Continue to remind your child of their coping plan and how proud you are of them for being brave (please remember that being brave does not mean withholding tears).