



How to make a hospital visit easier for your child or young person

Practical Information for parents and caregivers



Hospital Play Specialists Association
of Aotearoa/New Zealand Inc



Being with a child or young person in hospital can be a challenging event and affect the entire family. This brochure aims to give practical information to help make a visit to the hospital easier for you and your child.

As a parent or caregiver, you are the best source of support for your child or young person – you know what frightens them, how they cope with stressful situations and how they like to be comforted. If your own fears and concerns are such that they are making your child more anxious, talk them through with a member of the health care team or with other supportive adults out of your child's hearing.

Your presence and involvement are invaluable to your child's well-being so that they continue to feel loved and safe. Younger children "especially" will cope with the hospital experience better if a parent or other trusted person stays with them. If you have to leave, tell your child that you are going, when you will return and leave confidently, even if this causes distress. Make sure your nurse knows that you are leaving and when you will be back.

The importance of play

Play is a normal and vital part of childhood and a child's most powerful tool. It helps children make sense of their world and understand new experiences, develop new concepts, share and make friends, learn to be imaginative and communicate and express their feelings. It is particularly important that children have opportunities for play when they are in stressful situations, such as in hospital. It not only helps to build a child's confidence, independence and self-esteem but gives them a sense of participation by allowing them to make real choices. It can help them to understand why they are in hospital and what will happen, as well as helping to cope with their illness and with their treatment.



In most children's wards, a Hospital Play Specialist Service provides therapeutic play and recreation programmes for infants, children and young people during their stay in hospital. Siblings may also be able to access this service.

If your child is an infant, toddler or preschooler

- * Bring familiar items from home – blankets, cuddly toys, pacifier/dummy, soothing music, bottles.
- * Have a plan for someone to stay with your child as much as possible.
- * Explain things in words that are familiar to them.
- * Encourage your child to visit the playroom; practice playing “doctors and nurses” (letting your child be the doctor and you or a doll or teddy be the patient).
- * When talking about the hospital, describe what your child may hear, see, and smell.
- * Let your child know it is okay to have feelings about going to hospital, listen to their feelings and help your child talk about them.

If your child is school age

- * Bring familiar items from home such as a favourite blanket, pillow, slippers, activities (toys, books, music, arts and crafts).
- * Have a plan for someone to stay with your child as much as possible.
- * Share information with children about their health needs, honestly but sensitively.





- * Encourage your child to participate in their health care by asking questions and being included in discussions about their treatment.
- * It is not unusual for children to act younger than their age due to the stress of being in hospital.
- * Reassure your child that being in hospital is not a punishment.
- * Opportunities for your child to visit the playroom and socialise with other children may be available. Please check with your nurse.

If your child is a young person (adolescent)

- * Bring familiar items from home such as a favourite pillow or clothes.
- * Encourage your teen to keep a diary/memory book/autograph book as a record of their hospital stay.
- * Talk about being in hospital and the reason for admission openly and honestly.
- * Young people are more likely to maintain a trusting relationship if they feel included in the experience and are part of the decision making process. Encourage them to ask questions and express what they are thinking. Clarify any misconceptions that may arise in your conversations.
- * For many young people, fear of the unknown and fear of pain are common anxieties. Be honest with them about what might hurt and what they may feel.
- * Encourage contact with friends from school, especially if in hospital for a long time.
- * At times, young people may have little privacy in hospital and may benefit from having some “time out” to themselves.

What about my child's education while in hospital?

Most hospital play specialist services provide early childhood education programmes for children who are patients. Their brothers and sisters can usually participate too. There is no charge for these services in hospitals.

If your child usually goes to school and is in hospital for more than two weeks, they may be eligible to see a teacher from one of the three Regional Health Schools in New Zealand.

You can either talk to a teacher from the hospital school to see if your child is eligible or with your child's teacher from their regular school.

For more information about Regional Health Schools, including the criteria for accessing them, see: <http://www.minedu.govt.nz/NZEducation/EducationPolicies/SpecialEducation/ServicesAndSupport/RegionalHealthSchools.aspx>

Tips for helping your child or young person manage tests and procedures

- * Find out what will happen. Know why your child needs a procedure, how it might feel and how long it will last.
- * Consider being with your child during the procedure. Discuss this beforehand with the doctor or nursing staff and what your role will be.
- * Explain to your child simply but truthfully why the procedure is needed, what they can expect to feel, see and hear and who will be with them.
- * Try to avoid creating unnecessary concern, but do not make promises that you cannot keep; for example, do not tell your child that a procedure will not hurt unless you can be sure of this.





- * Encourage curiosity and exploration. Ensure that staff caring for your child explain to your child (not just to you) what they will be doing and the purpose of the equipment they are using.
- * Encourage your child to ask questions and to express any concerns they may have.
- * Where possible use simple language and explain the meaning of unfamiliar terms they may hear, such as “anaesthetic”. When describing a medical procedure try not to use words that have double meanings or which may be frightening (for example, use “make an opening” instead of “cut”).
- * Help your child manage pain or discomfort. Many coping strategies can be used to help reduce anxiety and perceptions of pain and discomfort, depending upon your child’s age. These can include squeezing your hand and saying “ouch”, distraction with bubble blowing, songs or stories, deep steady breathing, or playing on an iPad. (For more information see www.kidshealth.org.nz/childrens-pain-facts)
- * Afterwards, comfort your child in whatever ways are soothing and reassuring to them; for example, by holding, rocking or stroking or even just talking if your child is older.
- * Encourage play both before and after procedures. Playing, painting, and story-telling or story writing give children control, help them to express their feelings, understand what is happening, and cope with unfamiliar or difficult situations.

What to expect once your child/young person is home again

When children go home, it is common for them – and for their brothers and sisters – to need extra love, patience and attention until they feel secure again.

It is likely that your child’s behaviour may change for a time. They may worry more about things in general and particularly about their health or about minor injuries. They may be more “clingy” or

babyish. Eating and sleeping habits may change. They may be fearful in situations which remind them of hospital or of illness. All of these are very common reactions and should pass in time.

Opportunities to share their feelings, to talk about their experience if they want to, and to play "hospitals" will help. Older children may also like to draw pictures or make a book about their hospital stay.

For further information about helping your child or young person

For general information about a large range of topics relating to children's health, parenting, conditions and treatments:

www.kidshealth.org.nz

For information about your child's medical condition or disability, contact the Family Information Service through

www.starship.co.nz



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PO Box 26637, Epsom, Auckland 1344
www.hospitalplay.org.nz
info@hospitalplay.org.nz