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**HOSPITAL**

## Preparing for a Child's Hospital Stay

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**A** hospital stay can be frightening both for children and their parents, but it can also be a positive experience.

The experience of being away from home, of being sick or hurt and of being taken care of by adults who are not her parents will always be a traumatic challenge for a child.

Before you can help your child, you must handle your own anxiety. Ask your doctor about the procedures to which your child will be subjected. Arrange to be with your child at critical times. Plan to spend at least the first night or so in the hospital, until your child adjusts to being there—even if you have to fight with the hospital.



The next step is to prepare the child. Be as honest and complete as possible when describing what will happen. For example, if your child must have anesthesia, warn the child about the face mask, the smell of the ether or gas (or the needle stick) and tell her that you will try to be with her as they give it to her.

Assure your child that you'll be there as she wakes up, and that you'll help her through the day or two of feeling sick after the operation is over. When she feels better, she can have ice cream, etc.

Most children's hospitals now have nurses and child-activities specialists who know about children's reactions to pain and to hospital procedures. Ask them to advise you. Many children's hospitals offer preparatory tours for kids.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to prepare. More than half of the hospitalizations are emergency admissions.

A national organization called the Association for the Care of Children's Health can give you information. Write to the association at 7910 Woodmont Avenue, Suite 300, Bethesda, MD 20814, or call (301) 645-6549.

The parent who is present with the child in the hospital should be sure to congratulate her after she has made it through each procedure. Point out how tough going through test or operation was and that she conquered it.

The fears of mutilation that occur in a child's mind whenever she is ill are important for a parent to consider and to talk about. Parents should also remember that an illness will seem endless to a child. A child will inevitably feel that the illness is a punishment for something.

This sense of responsibility and the inability to be in control can reinforce the underlying feeling that she will never be well again. A kind of fearful resignation can set in and can affect a child's ability to recover.

She may refuse to take her medicines. She may act out and demonstrate relief when she is reprimanded.

If you see this pattern developing, you must let her know she is not responsible for her illness. Let her talk about her feelings.

Reassure her that you and her physician know how to treat her, and that she will get better. As she begins to cooperate, remind her that she is helping herself.