

## Going to hospital

By Professor Frank Oberklaid and Dr Leah Kaminsky, excerpt from 'Your Child's Health'

Going to hospital can be very stressful for children, as well as for parents and the rest of the family. Here are some things you can do to make this time easier for your child and yourselves.

Many parents find hospitals impersonal and a little intimidating. It can be disconcerting to:

- have to talk to lots of different health professionals
- be asked to repeat your child's medical history
- have your child disturbed frequently by repeated examinations or tests.

Nurses and doctors may change according to their rosters, so you probably won't see the same nurses or doctors every time. All this can increase your understandable anxiety about the health of your child. The child has their routine upset, is in a new and sometimes threatening environment, and often feels hurt or sick.

There are a number of things that you can do to make this time easier for your child and yourselves.

### Outpatient department

If you live in a large city, your hospital may have an outpatient department. The outpatient department is part of the hospital complex, and your child is given an appointment to see a specialist doctor and sometimes other professionals. Your child may be frightened about going to hospital, especially if they have a memory of having visited the hospital previously for a procedure, or needed to stay overnight. Many outpatient departments where children are seen have toys, books and other activities, and some employ play therapists, to keep children occupied while they are waiting and to make them feel less anxious. However, most don't, so it is worth taking some books or toys or other activities to keep your child entertained and distracted while you wait.

### Hospitalisation

Preparation for admission to hospital is always easier if the stay has been planned for in advance. If you have a choice, try to have your child admitted to a children's hospital or one where there is a dedicated children's unit and ward. Most hospitals have a pre-admission program of some kind – call and check if this is the case. The program will depend on the age of your child, and may include written materials for the child as well as parents, together with puppets, videotapes, a tour of the hospital, and so on.

If there is no organised pre-admission program, you may want to ask permission to show your child the hospital setting before the admission.

Hours during which immediate family members can visit children are virtually unrestricted, although there may be some time during the day when there is a 'rest period' for young children. All hospitals will encourage parents to stay with their child and to become involved with hospital staff in caring for their child's needs. Talk with the nursing staff about how this can best be done. Most hospitals will also encourage you to stay with your child overnight, either in a bed or lounge next to the bed or in separate accommodation in another part of the hospital or close by.

Children in hospital benefit greatly from:

- having their parents present during their time in hospital - this also significantly reduces the stresses of hospitalisation
- being surrounded by personal items from home, so you may want to bring some of their things. These may include a favourite stuffed toy, photographs, cards, letters, drawings, books, a radio or television, and so on, depending on the child's age. Some children's hospitals have in-house videos, showing special children's programs
- having their fears treated with respect. It doesn't help to tell your child not to be silly if he's scared about going to hospital
- visits from siblings and school friends.

Many supports are available in most hospitals. These include social workers, chaplains, play specialists, teachers (especially for children who require prolonged or repeated hospital admissions), psychologists and other professionals. Ask the nursing or medical staff about the sort of support services available, and use these services as needed.

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