

Helping a Child Cope with Illness and Hospitalization...



If a child suffers from an illness requiring a hospital stay, it is a stressful time for the entire family. Not only is it a challenging and unfamiliar experience, the child may also come face to face with some real fears and, therefore, be quite anxious. Parents are worried about the well-being of their child and possible financial strains.

What the child might be feeling:

- He knows something is wrong, even though he doesn't understand exactly what it is.
- He does not know why it happened to him.
- He thinks he caused the illness.
- He is in a strange and unfamiliar place.
- He worries he will never go home again.
- He is examined by new people and with strange and scary medical equipment.

How caring adults can help:

- Be patient with repeat questions.
- Be honest. If a child asks you if something might hurt, be truthful. A great response to such a question is, "It may hurt for a little while, but the doctors and nurses will do everything they can to make the hurt go away as fast as possible."
- Praise the child for having courage to endure scary experiences.
- Help children understand how their body works. By doing this, they can better understand when something goes wrong and need to be fixed.
- Show empathy, acknowledge the child's feelings, and listen when a child tells you what he fears.
- Give the child extra love, understanding, and attention.
- Be patient if the child acts out his fears and feelings through crying, anger, aggression, or reverts to babyish behaviors.
- Talking to children about the hospital and reading books about other children's medical experiences when they are well will help them understand better if they become seriously ill.
- Encourage dramatic play! Make sure children have pretend props to play doctor or nurse. They might want to act out giving a shot or getting an x-ray. Some things to include: doctor's kits, surgical masks, doctor's smocks, prescription slips for the doctor to fill out, stuffed animals and dolls.
- Teachers and parents should work together to prepare siblings and classmates before a child comes back to school/home. Be sure other children do not think they might catch the illness.
- Encourage children in the class to send cards, drawings, and greetings. A tape of circle time songs and stories would help the child feel he is not missing out on time with his friends.