

Preparing your Toddler for Surgery

What aspect about surgery is most stressful for a toddler?

Recognizing what is stressful to your toddler while in the hospital can guide you in preparing him/her for the surgical experience. Common stressors and fears in the hospital may include the following:

- Being left alone
- Having to stay in a strange bed or room
- Loss of comforts of home, family, and belongings
- Being in contact with unfamiliar people
- Painful procedures
- Medical equipment that looks and sounds scary
- Feeling Helpless

How do I prepare my toddler for surgery?

- Toddlers can benefit from preparation one or two days before surgery. Preparation too far in advance can produce more anxiety.
- Contact your Child Life Specialist at 972.566.4735 to learn more about preparing your toddler for surgery.
- Familiarize your baby with surgical hats and masks by playing a peek a boo game.
- Read books to your toddler about going to the hospital.
- Give very simple explanations and be careful of words you use. For example, say, “The doctor is going to fix your arm.” Do not say, “The doctor is going to make a cut on your arm.”
- Keep routines from home consistent as possible when in the hospital (stories before bedtime, watch favorite cartoon show, etc)
- Give your toddler realistic choices so he/she has some control. For example, let your child decide which security item he/she wants to bring to the hospital.
- Stay with child during the hospital stay when you can. Your touch and voice will comfort him/her more than anything else. Let the medical staff know your toddler’s typical routine along with likes and dislikes.
- Patience and keeping your cool are important. It is not uncommon for toddlers to regress and have angry outbursts and tantrums
- When possible, before and after surgery, allow your child to choose a play activity in the playroom for normalcy and to decrease the stress/anxiety related with hospitalization.
- Take care of yourself. Simplify your life during this time and do not be afraid to ask for help from family and friends. Remaining positive and calm can help reduce your toddler’s anxiety.