Let's Talk About ...

Helping Your School-Age Child (5 to 12 years) Cope with Being in the Hospital

School-age children tend to love to learn, try new things, and look for ways to feel accomplished. Friends are becoming more important and they often look for ways to please others. During this time, it is important to build their self-esteem by allowing more opportunities to feel independent and complete tasks on their own. You can improve your child's experience by using some of the tips in this handout and by talking with your healthcare team about the best ways to speak with and support your child.

What are common reasons school age children feel stress in the hospital?

The hospital can be an unfamiliar place that's outside of your child's comfort zone. A stay in the hospital may involve:

- Separation from parents and family
- Changes in routine (like sleep and eating patterns)
- Loss of choice and independence
- Fear of bodily harm and loss of bodily function
- Fear of the unknown
- Being away from friends and family
- Being away from school and normal activities
- Lack of privacy
- Less opportunity for choice and control
- Lack of predictability
- Increase in the number of people they interact with
- Being more self-conscious



What are signs your child could be under stress?

Watch for clues, such as:

- Regression (not using skills they have already learned)
- Expressing feelings in a different way (tantrums, crying, acting out, withdrawn)
- Guilt
- Lack of trust
- Less interest in normal activities
- Frustration because they are not able to participate in school and normal activities
- Isolation
- Embarrassment or being more self-conscious

How can you support your child?

You can help your child lower their stress levels and feel more comfortable by:

- Preparing them for hospitalization and any procedures that may receive
- Using simple and honest explanations
- Allowing them to safely explore their environment
- Helping them cope with medical procedures
- Reinforcing that hospitalization is not their fault
- Giving choices when possible
- Following a schedule and keeping daily routines when possible
- Allowing them to play and socialize when possible
- Allowing them to have privacy when necessary
- Encouraging independence
- Letting them know what is expected of them
- Limiting the number of people in their hospital room
- Offering praise and recognition for accomplishments
- Encouraging them to help make decisions regarding their care when appropriate
- Involving them in their care when appropriate
- Identifying and correcting any misconceptions
- Setting boundaries when appropriate
- Contacting their teacher to help with schooling during hospitalization

How can you help comfort your child?

If you sense your child is under stress, you can try:

- Being present with your child and listening to their concerns
- Practicing deep breathing
- Telling jokes and sharing laughter with one another
- Listening to music
- Watching videos and playing games
- Bringing comfort items from home
- Video chatting with friends and family
- Helping them recognize successes
- Validating their feelings and concerns

Questions for my healthcare team

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