

## Let's Talk About...

# Emotional Responses to Illness, Injury and Healthcare in Children

Illness, injury and receiving healthcare can be upsetting. Even a very short time in the hospital can be difficult, such as a same-day surgery or an emergency room visit. Your child may have pain and discomfort. Your child may be separated from parents and family. She could also have loss of privacy, movement, and normal routines. Your fears or worries may also affect your child.

The emotional experience of being in a hospital can change your child's behavior, even after she goes home. You may worry that these changes may not go away. It is important to understand that when a child is in the hospital, behavior changes that last for a short time are normal. These changes may continue for a while after your child goes home.

## What are some common changes I might notice?

Your child may have some of the following:

- Demand more attention
- Play-act about illness, injury or the hospital
- Act younger than she is, called "regression" (examples are that she may want help to eat, dress or bathe; demand a bottle; start thumb-sucking again or use a pacifier; throw temper tantrums; whine; lose control of bladder or bowel)
- An increased startle response
- Be on alert at all times, because she fears something scary or painful will happen, or fear that you or other loved ones will leave
- Trouble with sleeping (resist bedtime, wake up during the night, fear sleeping alone, have more fear of the dark, have nightmares or night terrors)

- More fear and distress about being separated from caregivers
- More fear of strangers
- More nervous responses, such as scratching, picking, and biting nails
- A change in eating patterns
- Cry and cling more
- Bed wetting
- Frequent angry responses
- Act out or behave in a way that is against the rules
- Fear physicians or other health team members
- More concerned about the body and its function
- Fears or more curiosity about death

It is normal for your child to have any of these behavior changes while she is in the hospital or after going home. This is true even if she was only in the hospital for a few hours or a day.

## How can I help my child's distress?

Some reasons why your child responds to illness, injury or being in the hospital cannot be helped. These include your child's age, length of time in the hospital and her illness, injury or surgery. But there are some ways you can help support and comfort your child.

## While in the hospital:

When possible, room with your child. If you stay with her this can decrease separation fears and help your child feel safer. Your presence can serve as a source of strength and comfort for your child.

Take care of yourself. Your stress and health directly affect your child. Get rest and eat regular meals. You need to do this to keep up your energy level and reduce your stress.

Support family connections. It is not always possible for family members and friends to visit your child. However, she can continue to gain support from them. Have family members phone your child or provide a video, art, or photographs. You can make a video of family greetings or of a family member telling a story. This will help your child feel her family connections.

Stay active in your child's care. You are a partner with your child's doctor and others on the healthcare team. You know your child best and have important information about your child's likes, dislikes, routines and typical behaviors. Your involvement is needed so we can give your child the best care.

Encourage your child to eat, play, nap, and go to bed at regular times, as much as possible. This will help her know what will happen. In turn, this will increase your child's sense of control, which is important. The healthcare setting takes away much of your child's sense of power over her body and world. Being able to predict what will happen next helps your child feel more in control.

Provide choices whenever possible. This helps increase your child's sense of control. Examples of choices include what they will eat, whether to have a bath now or after a video, whether to drink juice or milk, choosing to have a temperature measured in the right ear or left ear. It is important that you not offer a choice when there is really no choice. For example, when your child has no choice about when medicine can be taken, tell her: "It is time to take your medicine now". For example, do not ask her, "It's time to take your medicine, okay?"

Mentally prepare your child for procedures. Child Life Specialists can help prepare your child in a way that is right for her age. Ask your nurse or doctor to contact one of the Child Life staff before your child has a procedure or surgery. If you give your child accurate, honest information about a procedure or surgery she will have less fear and worry, and it will

help her cope. This is true for children as young as one year old.

Increase your child's sense of trust. Being honest with your child can help her cope with a hospital stay. For example, when you leave your child, tell her when and why you are leaving, and when you will return. If you cannot return to the hospital when you expected, be sure to call the hospital and tell your child about the delay. Your child may be sad or angry, but she will not worry that you will leave without telling her. Also, she will be able to predict your return and trust when you will be back. Hospital staff are always available to help your child cope with your separation. Be sure to write down telephone numbers that are important to your child and leave them at her bedside (for example, Grandma's number, your home phone and work numbers).

Support your child's development. Even in the hospital, play is how children learn, grow and cope. Playing with your child is another way to lessen anxiety. Interacting with other patients will make things more normal for your child. Active play can also help her work out feelings of being frustrated or upset while in the hospital.

### **After going home:**

Keep the normal rules, limits, and expectations. It may take time for your child to return to regular routines and schedules. However, it is best to practice the same parenting style as you did before the illness, injury, or being in the hospital.

Help your child process the healthcare experience. Some play, language or art with themes like health-care, anger, frustration, or separation will help her make sense of her injury, illness or hospitalization. For example, play "hospital" or "doctor" with your child, and have her talk about her hospital experience. Read stories with her about the hospital. Draw pictures or write notes to the hospital staff. Children, especially young children, often need to duplicate their experience over and over for several weeks. If you need ideas about activities to help your child while in the hospital or after going home, contact a child life specialist.

Be patient. Although it may take a lot of patience, it is important to be as supportive of your child as possible. Try to not punish your child if you notice regressive behavior (see list above) or if your child needs extra time and attention from you. Being patient with her behavior changes will help her return to normal as soon as possible.

Reassure your child that she will only have to go to the hospital when she is ill or injured. After going home, many children worry that they may suddenly be taken back to the hospital without warning. This is because they have a hard time understanding that illness, injury, and healthcare is not a punishment. Talk with your child about why people go to the hospital and reassure her that people are not injured or taken to the hospital because of “bad” behavior.

## **What do I do if I have questions and how long will these changes last?**

If you have concerns or want ideas to help your child while she is in the hospital, you can talk with a child life specialist or social worker. It is normal for behavior changes to last four to six weeks after going home from the hospital. If you notice behavior changes that last more than four to six weeks after going home, or if behavior changes seem extreme, your child may need a little extra help returning to her usual routine. We invite you to call the Child Life Department at 801.662.3701. You can also talk with your pediatrician about a referral to a local child therapist.