

Let's Talk About...

Brain Injury and Creating a Healing Environment

Children who have had a brain injury often have trouble tolerating activity, noise, and light after their injury. This may last for a while.

Your child's brain receives information all the time. This includes when they see, hear, touch, taste, or smell something. This large amount of information can be hard to handle after a brain injury. Your child may feel frustrated, confused or afraid if he cannot tell you what he needs or cannot change his surroundings (environment). Ways to change the environment could be to turn off the lights, ask visitors to be quiet or leave, or get in a more comfortable position.

It is important to create a healing environment where your child is not overwhelmed. This handout will help you learn common irritants or triggers and help you know when he is overwhelmed. It will also give you ideas about how to change your child's surroundings to help him heal. You can use these ideas at home and in the hospital.

What are the possible irritants or triggers that may overload my child?

- When he finds it difficult to express his needs and wants
- Unfamiliar environments
- Noises: such as visitors, people talking, beeping, television, music
- Touch: such as bunched blankets, twisted or tight clothing, bandages, massage, hand patting, itching
- Light: such as room lights, sunlight, television or computer screens
- Tiredness: did not get enough sleep, or did not get rest periods between activities
- Pain

- Elimination problems: wet brief, needing to use the bathroom, constipation
- Hospital cares: such as having blood pressure taken, physical exams, or dressing changes

What are the signs that my child is overwhelmed?

Children who are overwhelmed (can't cope, too much information) may be:

- Confused
- Frustrated
- Irritable
- Have mood swings
- Angry
- Aggressive (for example: kick, hit, bite, yell, threaten)
- Restless and repeat actions (for example: rub their head, kick their legs)
- Withdrawn (for example: not talk or interact with people)

What can I do to help my child?

Here are some things you can do to help your child:

Create a calm environment

- Decrease noise:
 - Turn off the television
 - Use low voices to speak near your child
 - Talk to visitors outside your child's room.
 - Close your child's door
 - Play soft calm music for short amounts of time
- Keep room lights dim:
 - Use indirect lights
 - Do not use bright overhead light

- Close blinds
- Turn off electronic devices
- Close the room door
- Limit visiting:
 - Only have visitors after your child has a rest
 - Limit the number of visitors in the room at a time
 - Encourage low voices during the visit
 - Only allow visitors to stay in your child’s room for short time
 - Use family areas and waiting rooms for the visitors

Encourage your child’s sleep

- Give him a quiet, dark room to sleep in
- Try to do cares (for example change his diapers, give him medicine) at the same time, to encourage naps and longer sleep at night
- Have a relaxing bedtime routine: for example, before bed give your child a bath, massage, relaxation techniques, story time and turn off the TV

Control pain

- Reposition your child according to his needs
- Use massage and relaxation techniques (for example deep breathing, imagery)
- Give pain medicine before activities that may cause discomfort

Manage bowel and bladder needs

- Check his diaper or brief frequently
- Offer the toilet, urinal, or commode frequently
- Prevent or manage constipation

Protect your child from harm

- Prevent your child from falling by staying with him when he walks around and when he uses the bathroom

- Remove sharp and dangerous objects from your child’s surroundings
- Pad your child’s bed rails as needed or consider a tent bed
- Protect his skin from rubbing

Decrease confusion

- Have consistent people around your child and bring familiar items from home
- Develop routines and schedules for your child
- Use orienting cues such as clocks, calendars, and signs
- Orient your child to the situation and who you are frequently (called “reorienting”)

Prevent agitation

- Use simple, clear language and a calm manner.
- Reinforce positive behaviors.
- Verbally redirect your child (ask your nurse to explain this).
- Reassure and reorient your child as needed.
- Explain what you will be doing before touching your child.
- Allow rest periods between activities.
- Notice the activities or the time of day when your child gets agitated. Adjust his schedule so he is less agitated.

Use these techniques when your child is agitated

- Use simple, clear language and a calm manner.
- Explain what you are doing.
- Avoid scolding or making fun of your child.
- Give your child a break from required activity when he is agitated.
- Do not try to reason with your child when he is agitated. He will not be thinking clearly at that time.