How Parents Can Help Children Cope With Procedures and Pain

Sometimes when a child is sick or hurt, it is necessary for physicians to do a procedure. The purpose of some procedures is to get more medical information; examples include doing a blood draw using a needle or collecting urine through a plastic tube called a catheter that goes into your child's urethra. The purpose of other procedures is for a treatment, such as putting in stitches for a cut or giving a shot of medicine through a needle.

It can be very difficult as a parent to see your child have pain from a procedure. Sometimes parents may feel frustrated that the procedure is causing pain and that the parent cannot make the pain go away. Parents can do several things to help a child with pain from a procedure.

- **Stay with your child during the pain.** This is important for children as young as babies and as old as teenagers. Having a loved one near is very comforting to children.
- **Hold or touch your child.** If you can hold your child in your arms during the procedure or without causing pain, this can greatly lessen your child's pain.
  - Kangaroo care: There is a special way to hold infants, called kangaroo care. This is when a mother or father holds the baby against her or his bare chest, with the baby wearing only a diaper. It is called kangaroo care because this position is similar to how kangaroos carry their babies. It has been used all over the world, and research suggests that it can increase babies' breastfeeding, bonding with parents, and growth and development. A study in this month's Archives found that babies who had kangaroo care during a painful procedure had less pain, even compared with babies who were given other pain management techniques.
  - If you are not able to hold your child during a procedure, even a gentle touch or holding a hand can be helpful to your child.
- **Be honest.** It is not a good idea to lie to your child and say that a painful procedure will not cause pain; this may hurt the trust your child has in you. If there is going to be pain with a procedure, let your child know that. You can also let your child know how you will be there for him or her during the pain.
- **Distract your child during the procedure.** There are many ways to help your child focus on things he or she enjoys, even during a procedure. If a child has other things to think about, the procedure may not affect him or her as much. Some ways to distract your child include playing music or singing with your child, showing a favorite video, reading a book, or just telling your child a favorite story. All of these can help your child relax and focus on the distraction rather than the procedure.
- **Include time for play.** If a visit to the doctor's office or hospital included a painful procedure, make some time for fun afterward. Consider a trip to a favorite toy store, the zoo, or the library or spending time at a friend's house.
- **Ask for help from experts.** Many hospitals include Child Life experts, who are hospital staff with special training in ways to help children cope with being in the hospital, including ways to help children cope with procedures. Pediatric psychologists can also be helpful in working with children who are struggling with chronic illnesses or numerous painful procedures. Expressive therapists can help children find ways to express their anger or frustration from having procedures in a beneficial way.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**
National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship
http://www.canceradvocacy.org/resources/treatment-issues/pain/children.html

**INFORM YOURSELF**
To find this and other Advice for Patients articles, go to the Advice for Patients link on the Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine Web site at http://www.archpediatrics.com/.

Source: National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship

Megan A. Moreno, MD, MSEd, MPH, Writer
Fred Furtner, Illustrator
Frederick P. Rivara, MD, MPH, Editor