

Supporting School Age Children For Surgery

What might cause my child to be worried or scared?

Surgery is a stressful experience for children. For children ages 6 - 11 years old, there are many sources of fear:

- **A lack of independence and control.** Children of this age want to feel accomplished and independent. Appropriate choices foster participation. Avoid comparing the child to younger children, as this can create shame.
- **Loss of Body Function and Pain** Children in this age group begin to understand differences and pain is often feared. This fear can impact how children perceive and remember pain. Reducing fear and anxiety is part of managing pain well.
- **The unknown.** Coupled with imagination, the unknown creates many misconceptions. Honest, and developmentally appropriate preparation is key to helping this age group cope.

How Can I Support my Child?

The following are strategies you can use to support your child:

- **Using simple and safe words to explain surgery,** like “surgery is what doctors do to fix something in our bodies...”, or “the sleep medicine will help so you don’t feel, see, hear or remember the surgery.”
- **Prepare your child.** It important your child is aware of the surgery and the things they might feel, see, hear, taste and may be asked to do. If you are unsure, ask for help.
- **Acknowledge and validate fears and worries, then**
- **Share and practice coping** strategies like deep breathing, squeezing playdoh, thinking of and sharing about a favourite place etc.
- **Play!** Medical play can help your child feel more comfortable and prepared for next steps.

How will I know if my child is worried or scared?

Children of this age typically tell the adults around them that they are scared or worried by:

- Behaving in ways they might not typically (testing limits or boundaries),
- **OR,** withdrawing; appear quite, and not engaging.
- Finding ways to feel control, like not drinking or changing into pajamas.
- Crying or expressing fear verbally.

Children often are aware of more than the adults around them might think. Don't be afraid to ask your child what they know, and how they are feeling.

Helpful things to bring:

- Items for coping (stress ball, pinwheel, book etc.)
- Games, books and activities for distraction
- Questions written down that your child may have asked, but you are unsure how to answer.



What are ways to support your child at home?

- Preparing your child 3-4 days in advance is helpful so that your child has time to prepare. Every child is different, this timing is a general suggestion.
- Asking them to help pack a bag with their favourite comfort item, favourite snack, favourite activities gives them sense of control.
- Be sure to have the things you will need at home to support your child. For example, if they will only be able to have liquids after ensure you have juice or popsicles at home. Have books, movies, or quiet activities available, too!