

# When a Child Is Hospitalized

## TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES



### Talking About Going to the Hospital

Whether for a check-up with a pediatrician or an overnight surgery stay, going to the hospital can be a frightening and confusing experience for children of all ages. A difficult thing for many children to understand is why something has to hurt or make them feel badly in order to make them feel better. Not talking with the child at all about going, or telling them too much can make the situation more difficult.

### Child Life Specialists

At the hospital, you may encounter a Child Life Specialist, who is an expert in child development. Their job is to help your child cope with hospitalization in the best way possible, through play, preparation, education, and expressive activities like arts and crafts. They are there to provide informational and emotional support for your child and your family, making sure to aid your child's development along the way. In other words, they help your child maintain the best outlook possible on medical experiences—an outlook that they can carry with them for medical experiences in the future.

Although a child life specialist will be available to you once your child enters the hospital, there are several things you can do to help your child cope with the situation at home. Here are some tips organized by age group:

#### 0-3 Years

- If possible, plan doctor's visits or procedures around your child's normal routine.

- Bring your child's pacifier, bottle, teddy bear, blanket or other comforting objects from home.
- Ask friends and family members for their support. Try to be sure that you or one of them is with your child at all times—this can be especially helpful when you need a short break.
- Reassure your child that you will be with them as much as possible.
- Spend time reading to your child about going to the doctor or visiting the hospital (see resources for some titles).

#### 3-6 Years

- Start preparing your child one or two days in advance.
- Allow them to pack their own overnight bag, choosing which pajamas to bring and other items to include. When packing, have the child include some familiar objects from home, such as favorite toys, blankets, dolls, or stuffed animals.
- If the child will be hospitalized for an extended length of time, it might be helpful to bring a new toy, just to give them something fresh and engaging to lift their spirits along the way.
- Read books about hospitalization or doctor's visits with your child.
- It can be fun and beneficial to play doctor or nurse with your child beforehand, using pretend medical equipment.

#### 6-12 Years

- Start preparing your child four or five days before the appointment if possible.
- Bring favorite toys or games.
- Be honest and upfront about the hospital visit.
- Respect your child's questions and concerns and encourage them to express to you what they are thinking or questioning.
- This age group is growing interested in privacy, so you will want to emphasize that their privacy will be respected while in the hospital. As a parent, you also should be ready to advocate for your child's privacy to medical staff.



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## RESOURCES

### 12-18 Years

- Teenagers understand more information about their hospitalization, but that doesn't mean they understand everything. Encourage them to ask questions—if not to you, then to a doctor or nurse.
- Be sure they are included in decisions that need to be made regarding treatment or the hospital stay.
- They may be worried about their privacy, especially when they may be facing surgery. Ensure them that their privacy will be respected.
- Familiar objects such as their iPod, favorite DVDs, or journals can be helpful.
- Encourage visits or communication from friends and peers, whether via phone, email, or in person.

### Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, educators and service providers, researchers, students, and policy makers. Faculty and staff engage in interdisciplinary research, training, service, and information dissemination and work in collaboration with local, state and national networks and partners. (615) 322-8240, toll-free (866) 936-8852, [vkc.vumc.org](http://vkc.vumc.org)

### Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Provides free information, referral sources, and help with navigating services via phone, email, and website. Assistance is available to individuals of all ages, all types of disabilities, and all languages spoken. Its website includes a directory of more than 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county, topic of interest, and other filters. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC and is partially funded by Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities and other state agencies. (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636, [TNPathfinder.org](http://TNPathfinder.org)

### Two Easy Ways to Take Part in Research

StudyFinder is a searchable database that lists current VKC studies. Studies seek people of all ages with and without developmental disabilities. See [vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder](http://vkc.vumc.org/studyfinder). Research Match is a secure place for volunteers and researchers to connect. See [researchmatch.org](http://researchmatch.org).

### Other Local and National Resources

- **Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt Child Life Services**  
[www.childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/program/child-life-services](http://www.childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/program/child-life-services)
- **Health Library, Jr. League Family Resource Center**  
[www.childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/information/family-resource-center](http://www.childrenshospitalvanderbilt.org/information/family-resource-center)
- **The Child Life Council**  
[www.childlife.org](http://www.childlife.org)
- **American Academy of Pediatrics**  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)
- **KidsHealth**  
[www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org)

### Helpful Article

- **"Preparing Your Child for a Hospital Stay"**  
(St. Louis Children's Hospital)  
[www.stlouischildrens.org/visit-us/preparing-for-your-visit/inpatient-visit/preparing-your-child-for-a-hospital-stay](http://www.stlouischildrens.org/visit-us/preparing-for-your-visit/inpatient-visit/preparing-your-child-for-a-hospital-stay)

### Books for Toddlers and Preschoolers

- Hautzig, D., & Elliott, D. (1985). *A Visit to the Sesame Street Hospital*. New York: Random House.
- Rey, A.H. (1966). *Curious George Goes to the Hospital*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- Rogers, Fred. (1988). *Going to the Hospital*. New York: Putnam Juvenile.

### Books for School-Age Children

- Mayer, M. (2005). *Little Critter: My Trip to the Hospital*. New York: HarperFestival.
- Bridwell, N. (2000). *Clifford Visits the Hospital*. New York: Scholastic.

### Books for Adolescents

- Carter, S. (2002). *Coping with a Hospital Stay*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group.

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