

Hospitalizations for Children with Autism

Introduction

Hello and welcome to “Hospitalizations”, brought to you by the Pacific Autism Center for Education’s Porchlight Education Series. Today we are going to talk about what you can do to make a hospital stay more manageable for your child.

Visiting a hospital is a daunting experience for most children. Not only are they faced with unfamiliar sights and smells, but they also interact with a host of unknown people, many of whom speak to or touch your child to perform required procedures. Hospital stays are also uncomfortable, with a child having to adjust to a new environment and bed. For children with autism, sensory processing challenges, social and language deficits and the inability to communicate how they are feeling can exacerbate the entire experience. Today we will review some tips on how you can prepare for a hospital stay in advance, and what you can do during your visit to make this experience easier for your child.

Preparing for a Visit

If your child requires a scheduled procedure at a hospital, you can prepare them in advance for the experience. Here are some suggestions:

- 1) Take a hospital tour – You and your child can request a hospital tour, where your child will be able to see the facility and meet with some of the staff. You can talk to your child about what to expect during their procedure and this may help ease some of their anxiety on the day of the procedure.
- 2) Use visual aids- Visual aids can be useful when you want to communicate a sequence of events to your child, especially if they are non-verbal. Speak to a nurse at the hospital prior to the day of the procedure to understand the steps your child will go through at the hospital, and create visual aids to use at the hospital. You can also take visual aids for your child to use to communicate with the hospital staff, such as pictures of items that they may want or need.
- 3) Social Stories - Before you go to the hospital, you can use a social story to explain what will happen, how your child might feel and how you expect your child to behave at the hospital. Many such stories can be found online, or you can create your own story that is specific to their procedure or treatment.
- 4) Role Play – Use role plays to demonstrate what will happen at the hospital. Take turns with your child playing doctor and patient, and use the opportunity to address some of your child’s fears. For example, you can role play getting a blood test, and say “You will feel a pinch for a second... now it’s all better!” You can also use dolls to demonstrate the events that will occur during your child’s visit to the hospital.
- 5) Write a plan for the hospital staff – Share a written plan with your child’s doctors and nurses that explain what you would like them to do with your child in different situations. Explain what behaviors are considered normal for your child, and what techniques

may work if your child gets agitated. Include any visual aids that may help them communicate with your child. You should also list all of your child's current medications, medical diagnoses, and allergies. This will make it easier for you to recall these details when you are at the hospital. Keep in mind that the hospital may have their own established procedures for managing aggressive behavior, and you can talk with your child's doctor about them. You can also keep a plan like this on hand for unexpected emergency room visits.

- 6) Pack a comfort bag – Be sure to pack a bag of comfort items for your child, including special blankets, toys, toothbrushes, night clothes, clothes, sensory toys, games and snacks (if allowed). Some hospitals will allow your child to dress in their own night clothes. Comfort items will help your child feel more at home in their unfamiliar surroundings.
- 7) Discuss sedation in advance – If you are concerned about aggressive behavior, or about your child's fears, you can talk to your child's doctor about sedation in advance of their procedure. Ask about what circumstances will require sedation and let them know your preferences. Mild sedatives may make an unpleasant or painful procedure more tolerable for your child. You should also talk about safety restraints and clarify what is and is not acceptable to you.
- 8) Take reward tokens with you – Pack some special reward tokens for your child. These could include stickers, special toys, food if allowed, or any other tangible reward token that you use. Reward your child frequently when they behave appropriately at the hospital.

At the Hospital

- If possible, request the first appointment in the day for outpatient procedures. This will reduce your child's wait time at the hospital.
- Alert the team to any allergies and food sensitivities that your child has.
- Most hospitals have a procedure room where they can perform small procedures such as an IV insertion. Ask for your child to use this room for procedures if possible, so that they do not associate their room with pain and fear.
- Many hospitals will have choices in terms of the smell and taste of medications that they use. For example, some hospitals can ask a child about smells they like, and use a special spray to create a favorable scent for a mask that they may be required to breathe through. Ask about these if you are concerned about specific sensory issues that may bother your child. You can also request to have the nurses dim the lights in your child's room if bright lights bother your child.
- You may find that asking your child's doctor to let them touch and feel medical instruments such as a stethoscope might make the examination less stressful for your child. Ask for extra time if you feel this will benefit your child.
- You may want to request the staff to use local anesthetics when possible, for procedures such as blood work etc. This may reduce localized pain during small procedures.
- Use reward systems and tokens liberally for good behavior. You can encourage your child to comply with the hospital staff by treating them to desired items every time they cooperate.

- You can request that a limited number of staff interact with your child.
- Talk to the dietician to discuss what your child can eat during their stay. Most hospitals can make accommodations based on food allergies and dietary preferences.
- Keep ipads, tablets on hand for long wait periods or for entertainment in their room. Remember to bring the charger!

Conclusion

We hope you have found the ideas we talked about today to be useful. Hospitalizations are never easy for children with autism or their caregivers. The key is to prepare in advance whenever possible and to be a strong advocate for your child during their stay. In addition to the ideas shared above, you can also show your child videos online about preparing for a hospital visit. If your child has follow up visits with the doctor, you can also view our module on 'Visiting the Doctor' on the Porchlight website. Thank you for taking the time to view this module today.