

# Preschooler Reactions to Health Care Settings or Medical Procedures

## Key Points

Encourage your child to bring a familiar toy or favorite object (such as a blanket, stuffed animal or book) to the hospital or clinic for comfort.

## Developmental Information

Preschoolers (ages 3½-6) are developing imaginative and magical thinking. They often perceive pain as a punishment. They may have more difficulty identifying the source or the location of pain and are likely to actively resist during painful procedures. At this age, children often fear permanent damage to their body. This is especially true if the doctor is going to fix something inside their bodies that they can't see. Preschool children may exhibit behavior changes or regress to earlier childhood behaviors. For instance, they may throw tantrums, or act clingy, quiet, angry, aggressive or uncooperative.

When preparing for medical procedures or a hospital stay, ask the health care provider to explain what your child will undergo and to clarify your role. (For example: What can you do to help? Can you be with your child for the entire time?) Ask about pain medicines that can be given before and if you can be present during the procedure.

Rehearse the procedure at home. Ask children if they can think of things that will help them to manage during the procedure. Reassure children that no one is to blame for their illness, injury or condition and that they will come home again.

Encourage your child to bring a familiar toy or favorite object (e.g., blanket, stuffed animal) for comfort. Be positive and honest. Emphasize that only certain parts of the body will be involved. Explain, in simple terms, the purpose of the procedure, telling them what will happen and if it will hurt. Let your child know when you will be present.

Remember, always encourage and support your child with words and touch. Remind children it's OK to feel scared, upset or angry. In addition, the following ideas will help your preschooler cope:

**Sensory**

**Thinking or Behavioral Distractions**

**Imagery/Pretend  
Situations**

Patting	Blowing bubbles	
Stroking	Pinwheels	
Music	Sound books	Trip to the park
Hand-holding/cuddling	Counting	Blowing out candles
Movies	Singing favorite songs	Create amusement park
Talking softly	Magic wands	Television fantasy-make up shows
Squeeze a hand, putty or a pillow	Hand-held games	Tell stories
Heat/ice pack	Deep breathing	

[Make An Appointment](#) **651-290-8707** [Refer a Patient](#) **651-325-2200**

This information is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care providers. If you have any questions, talk with your doctor or others on your health care team.

If you are a Gillette patient with urgent questions or concerns, please contact Telehealth Nursing at [651-229-3890](#).