Children and Pain: Ages and Stages

Children of different ages will react differently to pain. Your child will have a different understanding of pain than a child of a different age. Children also respond better to different ways for coping at different ages. Explanations of the various coping ideas are offered later in the brochure.

Infants

Infants rely on you to notice their pain: watch restlessness, decreased or increased activity, loss of appetite, clinging or whining.

Techniques to help them:
- Distraction – use a rhythmic voice, gentle massage, soft music, slow breathing.
- Hold the child.

Toddlers & Preschoolers (2-5 years)

Due to their undeveloped understanding young children relate to pain primarily as a physical experience. They also think in terms of magical disappearance of pain. They believe that their pain is someone’s fault. Children in this group are likely to strike out physically or verbally when they hurt. They need to be reassured that their pain is not punishment or imagined misbehavior.

Techniques for Pain Relief
(Always check with your doctor before doing any of these exercises.)

Deep breathing: This is the easiest technique to use. Have your child breathe in deeply through his nose and blow out through his mouth. Encourage this throughout the procedure. Breathe with your child. Use illustrations your child will understand when explaining the breathing (for example, breathe in like you are smelling a beautiful flower, blow out slowly like you are blowing out all your birthday candles, or blow bubbles).

Thought Stopping: This technique is used prior to a painful procedure and should be ongoing. Encourage your child to replace negative thoughts (“I can’t do it!” or “This will hurt real bad!”) with positive thoughts (“This might hurt, but I will feel better soon” or “I know I can do it”). With younger children, try reading The Little Engine That Could.

Rehearsal: This technique also should be used prior to an event. Role-play the event. Have your child act out the procedure using positive coping techniques. If they won’t role-play, help them see themself (in their mind) handling the situation well.

Distraction: Help your child focus on something other than the pain. Read a book, listen to music (headphones are great; classical music is very soothing), stare at an object, recite familiar nursery rhymes or poems, practice counting alphabet/math facts, play electronic games or blow bubbles (this also encourages deep breathing). Many “tools” are available that can be used for distraction: “magic” or glitter wand, oil or sand toys, Magna Doodles/Etch a Sketch, etc.

Adolescent (13 years and older)

Teens often are afraid of losing control or looking like a baby. They often are hesitant to express feelings of pain. They should not be teased or shamed if they cry or show pain in other ways. This age group often may require more practice than any other age group.

Techniques to help them:
- Same as school-age

Progressive Relaxation: With this technique, your child will tense and relax various muscle groups. This technique works well combined with deep-breathing.

Have your child tense a muscle group (listed below) for approximately seven seconds. Say the word “relax” to the child and have them say it to themself. They will let the muscle group relax and concentrate on the sensation of relaxation. They should continue to concentrate on feeling the relaxation in the muscle group for approximately four to five seconds. Then have the child tense the next muscle group.

Muscle groups:
1) right hand and forearm (make a fist).
2) right upper arm (push down with elbow).
3) left hand and forearm.
4) left upper arm.
5) forehead and scalp (wrinkle forehead and frown).
6) nose, lips, and upper cheeks (wrinkle nose).
7) mouth, jaw and cheeks (smile wide and clench jaw).
8) chin and throat (tense muscles in neck and under chin).
9) chest and back (breathe deeply, pull shoulder blades together).
10) stomach (harden stomach muscles).
11) right upper leg.
12) right calf and right foot (push toes down and arch foot).
13) left upper leg.
14) left calf and left foot.

Imagination: Help your child see a picture in his mind of something or someone he likes. Your child does not have to close his eyes (many children are afraid of “sneak attacks”), but it is helpful. Combine this activity with deep breathing. In a soothing voice, ask your child questions about what he is “seeing.” Encourage him to see the details of his picture. Somethings children often like to ‘look at’ are vacation spots, school, family or friends, favorite activities and nature scenes. Tapes can be purchased to help guide children. Some of our favorites are the Mind Works series and Follow the Clouds.
When Your Child Is In Pain...

Suggestions to help your child deal with pain and painful procedures

Tips to Remember

• Practice. Help your child become familiar with the techniques before he actually needs to use them. Bedtime is a good time to practice as your child is usually already relaxed.

• Take an active role as “coach.” Direct your child in their efforts to relax.

• Use a quiet, monotone voice.

• Keep distractions to a minimum (for example, don’t try to use relaxation in the living room with the TV on and your other children running in and out).

• Lower the lights if possible. Make sure the room is at a comfortable temperature (a little on the warm side aids in relaxation).

• Try to stay positive. Praise your child when he is coping successfully, even if it is just for a second.

• Watch your body language – lean in toward your child (that says, “I’m here for you”).

• If your child can, encourage them to help during the procedure in some way (even if it’s just by holding a role of tape or undoing a bandage). Also, set up a signal so that if your child becomes overwhelmed, they can stop the treatment. Be consistent about when you will start the treatment again (for example, at the signal, stop for a count of 10).

• Don’t forget that it’s okay for your child to cry, talk or scream. You want your child to be able to express his feelings while coping successfully.

For many parents, one of the hardest parts of having a child who’s hurt or sick is seeing their child in pain. This brochure has suggestions and explanations of ways to help your child deal more successfully with pain and painful procedures. This brochure will help you learn how to “coach” your child through procedures. Though his or her pain may not go away after using these suggestions, they should help your child learn to take control over the pain.

If you have any questions after reading this brochure, please call the Child Life and Education Department at 364-1412.

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