



Checklist for Parents: Help Your Child Get Ready for Surgery

If your child is having surgery, it's normal to feel anxious. The American Society of Anesthesiologists® recommends parents provide comfort, stability, and reassurance to a child having surgery. Here's how:

Be honest

It's important to tell your child about the surgery, being forthright about what will happen. The fear of the unknown often is worse than reality. That doesn't mean you need to provide scary details. For example, you might say the doctor is going to fix the problem or make an opening (vs. cut). Tell a toddler about the surgery a few days before the procedure, but do so a week or two beforehand for a school-aged child. Explain that the reason for the surgery is to help them get better.

Seek guidance

Some hospitals give children hospital tours so they are more familiar with the environment, have child life specialists who can help explain how things work, or offer child-oriented videos. Your local library can be a great resource, too. Check out age-appropriate books about having surgery and read them to (or with) your child.

Involve your child

Let your child help with packing. Bringing a book, favorite stuffed animal, or music can provide comfort. For an infant, choose a favorite toy or blanket. Younger children might benefit from acting out going to the hospital through play. You can use pictures, dolls, and other toys to answer their questions.

Be calm

Children take cues from their parents, so if you're calm and confident your child will likely feel much better about having the procedure.

Talk about the anesthesia

Your child will be given anesthesia so he or she will not have pain and in most cases will be unaware during the procedure. You can explain that a specially trained doctor — a physician anesthesiologist — will provide medicine to make sure he or she takes a nap or will be asleep and won't have any pain during surgery. (Avoid saying the doctor will put you to sleep, because some children may be reminded of a pet who was put to sleep.) Provide assurance that your child will wake up and be fine afterward. The physician anesthesiologist can show how the anesthesia will be given — either through a mask or through a needle (IV).

Provide reassurance of pain control

While there may be pain and nausea after surgery, reassure your child that the physician anesthesiologist will help lessen or prevent these issues by providing medication to ease discomfort and stomach upset.

Be there

Most importantly, reassure your child that you will be there (in some cases, you might even be able to stay with your child during the administration of anesthesia), waiting nearby during the procedure and will see your child shortly after he or she wakes up following surgery.