

PARENT SERIES

University of Kansas, Clinical Child Psychology Program
Parent Series Editor: Carolyn S. Schroeder, Ph.D., ABPP

Handling Pain at Doctor Visits

Christina Amaro, M.A. and Carolina M. Bejarano, B.S.

It's common for even the youngest children to undergo painful medical procedures at doctors' offices or hospitals. These procedures, such as immunizations, blood draws, stitches, surgery and even dental care, may cause anxiety, fear and emotional distress for children as well as for their families. Each child's experience is unique, and early responses to painful medical procedures play a significant role in their future responses to pain.

These factors play a role in how a child perceives pain:

- The amount of attention parents and their child give the pain
- How reactive or upset parents are by the child's pain
- How much control the child feels he or she has over the pain or situation causing pain
- The number and type of the child's previous painful experiences
- The child's age
- The child's emotional state during a painful procedure (anxious vs. calm)
- How distracted the child is by other activities or sensations

The following research-based explanations and strategies can be used **before**, **during**, and **after** medical procedures to address these factors and help parents and children reduce pain and distress.

Before: How Parents Can Prepare for a Doctor Visit

General tips:

- Provide your child with information about what will happen and what he or she should expect, including what he or she will see, hear, touch and smell.
- Be honest, but be aware that too much information may cause anxiety.
- Ask your questions of the child's doctor ahead of time, before the procedure.
- Applying over-the-counter or topical anesthetic cream, such as EMLA cream, may be appropriate. Ask the doctor about this beforehand. If recommended, apply it 30-60 minutes before the procedure.

Avoid:

- Anxiety-provoking words such as "hurt," "pain," "shot," and "cut." Instead, use descriptive words like "poke," "freeze" and "squeeze" to describe procedures.
- Deceiving the child about what will happen.
- Telling the child that he or she will have control over the situation. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to," for example.

Recommendations: Preparation for Painful Procedures

Age Group	Action	Timing	Other considerations	Example
Infants	Apply topical anesthetic cream. Use Buzzy the Bee. See the Resources section for information on Buzzy.	Immediately before the procedure	Nursing, feeding or providing a pacifier dipped in sugar water may help.	Consult the infant’s doctor and plan appropriate use of anesthetic cream. Prepare to use Buzzy the Bee and bring it to the visit.
Toddlers	Inform the child of the “how” and “when” of the procedure, in language he or she understands.	Same day for minor procedures. Five to seven days in advance for intensive procedures	Allow enough time to inform the child, but not so much that worries can grow.	“Today, we are going to the doctor’s office. The doctor will take a little blood from your arm to make sure everything in your body is working properly.”
School-age children and adolescents	Inform the child about the procedure’s “how” and “when” in language he or she understands.	Five to seven days in advance	Allow an opportunity for the child to ask questions and manage fears.	“Next week we are going to your doctor to make sure you are healthy and ready to start school. They will need to give you a vaccination, but we can play a fun game while we wait.”

During: *How Parents Can Help During the Doctor Visit*

General tips:

- Stay calm as possible. Your anxiety will increase the child’s anxiety.
- Distract and help the child focus on breathing. See strategies in the following table.
- Take short breaks during longer procedures.

Avoid:

- Giving assurance that “everything is going to be okay.” This can actually increase distress.
- Apologizing for the procedure.
- Threatening punishment if the child doesn’t behave.

Strategies to Help Children Cope with Pain

Age Group	Coping Strategies
Infants	Use distractions like pacifiers, toys or bubbles.
Toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use bubbles or party blowers to help with deep breathing.• Use distractions like songs, pop-up books, or toys.• Hold the child during the procedure if appropriate.
School-age children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage deep breathing.• Play a role in the procedure like picking out the color of the Band-Aid.• Distract the child with games on a smartphone or tablet, or tell stories, or jokes, or make conversation not related to the procedure, or play an “I Spy” game.• If the procedure is lengthy, and the child is worrying a lot, consider seeing a therapist for helpful-behavioral techniques.• Hold the child’s hand during the procedure if appropriate.
Adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage deep breathing.• Play a role in the procedure like holding the gauze.• Distract the child with headphone music, games on a smartphone or tablet, or conversation not related to the procedure.• If the procedure is lengthy and the adolescent is worrying a lot, consider seeing a therapist for helpful behavioral techniques.

After: How Parents Can Conclude the Experience

General tips:

- Reinforce coping skills through praise such as, “I am so proud of you for using your deep breathing; you were calm and brave.”
- Reward the child for good behavior, such as deep breathing or engaging with distractions during the procedure. Rewards may include a small prize, treat or extra time with parents in fun activities.
- Use ice packs, heat packs or massage if appropriate.

Avoid:

- Making false promises such as “I will never let that happen to you again.”
- Giving rewards if the child had a tantrum during the visit.

Summary of Do’s and Don’ts for Pain during Doctor Visits

Do	Don’t
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Describe the medical procedure ahead of time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Criticize or threaten punishment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide distractions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Say it is going to be okay.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take deep breaths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Apologize for the procedure.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use topical anesthetics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Say it will be over soon.

Resources:

- Lemanek, K.L., & Joseph, M. (2011). Pain and Medical Procedures. In G.P. Koocher & A.M. LaGreca (Eds.), *The Parent’s Guide to Psychological First Aid: Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Predictable Life Crises* (49-53). New York: Oxford University Press.
- *It Doesn’t Have to Hurt*
This brief YouTube video was developed for parents and includes tips on how to make needles easier for children: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgBwVSYqfps>
- *How Pain Works*
The website provides more information about how pain works through Gate Control Theory: <http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/inside-the-mind/human-brain/pain.htm>
- *Buzzy*[®]
Buzzy[®] is a device shaped like a bee that may be especially useful for infants and toddlers. Its wings have a cold pack and the body vibrates. *Buzzy*[®] is placed on the skin near the site of the injection or pain, which helps manage the child’s perception of pain during procedures like immunizations. More information can be found at this website: <http://buzzy4shots.com/what-is-buzzy/>