

How to Prepare Your Preschooler for Their Surgery or Procedure

Having surgery or a procedure can be scary for children of any age. This handout will tell you more about how to prepare your pre-schooler for their surgery or procedure.

What your child may be worried about at this age

Pre-schoolers, or children between the ages of 3 and 5 years, learn new things by playing. Being in the hospital changes their daily routines and activities. Some common things pre-schoolers are worried about before a surgery or procedure include:

- New places and people they don't know.
- Not understanding why they are going to the hospital. They may think the procedure is happening because they did something wrong.
- Fear of painful procedures.

When you should prepare your child

You can prepare your child **1 to 2 days before** the surgery or procedure.

How to prepare your child

- **Reading books:** See **Additional Resources** below for age-appropriate materials that help prepare your child for their surgery or procedure.
- **Play:** Use their toys, stuffed animals, or toy medical play kits to talk about their upcoming procedure.
- **Be specific:** Give your child honest and clear information when talking about the procedure and upcoming hospital visit. It is easy for children to be confused by words at this age. For example, they may not understand the difference between "sleep" for surgery and "sleep" at home.

Talking with your child about their surgery or procedure

Some children like to learn more about what to expect, and others may not want to know too much. Every person is different, and you know your child best.

When talking with your child about what to expect:

- Find a time when you and your child can talk without being interrupted.
- Speak honestly, positively, and in a way that your child can understand.
- Listen to your child's feelings and concerns.

Some things that your child may want to talk about include:

- The hospital.
- The surgery or procedure.
- The care they will be receiving.

Procedures at Stanford Children's Health

Talking with your child about their surgery or procedure (continued)

It's OK if you don't know the answers to your child's questions. Your child's care team will be able to answer any questions that your child might have. It can be helpful to write down your family's questions and bring them along on the day of the surgery or procedure.

Additional resources

See the table below for age-appropriate materials that help prepare your child for their surgery or procedure.

Resource name	Information
Saul Has Surgery	In this online story, a young child named Saul tells about what happened when they had surgery. They discover that everything turns out OK.
Get Ready for Your Child's Surgery	This online article for parents shares things you can do to help you and your child prepare for surgery.
Franklin Goes to the Hospital by Paulette Bourgeois	This book is about Franklin, a young turtle who goes to the hospital for surgery. He learns that even though he's feeling scared, he can still be brave.
Surgery on Sunday by Kat Harrison	This book is about Sunday, a young child who is worried about their ear surgery. They soon learn that surgery isn't so scary after all.
A Sleepy Tale: My First Surgery by Jennifer Maziad, MD	This book is a fun story that will help children prepare for the process of having surgery and getting anesthesia.
S is for Surgery: A Kid's Surgery Book from A-Z by Dyan Fox	This activity book tells children about what might happen while at the hospital.

If you would like to discuss these or other ideas for preparing your child for their surgery or procedure, you can call the **Child Life office** at **(650) 497-8336**. Our Child Life Specialists can visit your child in the hospital and help them understand and deal with their surgery or procedure. They also help children feel more comfortable about their medical condition and why they are in the hospital.