



Complex Child E-Magazine

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Using Fun, Humor to Help Children through Hospital Stays and Procedures by Pattie Curran

I could write a book on helping children cope with hospitals and medical procedures. Having two children with Shwachman-Diamond Syndrome, we have seen our fair share of hospitals. The procedures and hospitalizations affect every member of the family. No one escapes the stress. We can minimize the effects of the stress by using active coping strategies.

In this article, I will address using fun as an active coping strategy to help children cope. We have all heard about the healing power of humor. Well, fun and play are also healing for the mind, body and spirit. Mix fun, play and humor and you are sure to help your child cope with hospitalizations and medical procedures while building a few enjoyable memories along the way.

Creating a Positive Attitude

No one likes to go to the hospital. No one likes needles. Unfortunately, for some children, this is a common occurrence in their lives. My boys have had anxiety and fear about procedures, but they have never hated the hospital or not wanted to go! Amazing! My youngest has an extreme fear of needles, yet he has always been excited about going to the hospital to see his favorite nurses and doctors. One day, we had to reschedule an appointment and he was actually disappointed that he was not going to see his favorite nurse! This is what prompted me to look back on what we had done to give him this positive attitude.

We have always made hospital days fun and exciting. Surprisingly, it does not always cost a lot of money. Not only did we use social stories to allay their fears, but we also planned fun activities to get them to be less anxious about the upcoming procedures and hospitalizations.

Everyone loves a good, clean joke, right? The boys have had fun playing jokes on the doctors and nurses. Prior to my youngest son's neurosurgery, we asked nurses what the neurosurgeon's favorite candy was and a few other things. We had heard he liked to have his young patients say, "Go Duke!" before they fell asleep. We could not have that! We are LSU fans! So we spent time with my youngest planning out the details of the "joke."

We bought Crunch bars, Pepsi and a brand new LSU mug. We placed these items in a nice little gift bag and thought of what else we could do.

We had a relative send us rub-on LSU tattoos to place on his back (after we checked with the nursing staff about placement). The night before his neurosurgery, we carefully placed the LSU tattoos on Joseph's back to "play a joke" on the neurosurgeon. Joseph was so excited and just could not wait to play his joke. When the neurosurgeon came into the room before surgery, we gave him his special gift and told him that he could not ask Joseph to say, "Go Duke" before falling asleep. This brought giggles to Joseph which turned into a belly laugh when the neurosurgeon replied, "Oh, that's OK. I'm going to write 'Go Duke' on the inside and it will light up so you'll be able to see it only at night."



After the surgery, the surgeon met us in a room to give us the run down of the surgery. Just before he left the room he said, "Oh, tell Joseph that I left a special message for him." In recovery, they had to move Joseph at one point and we saw the sign. The doctor had written, "Go Duke" on a piece of tape and placed it on Joseph's back just above the incision site. We were all laughing so hard we could hardly contain ourselves.

When Joseph was coming out of anesthesia, he had an oxygen mask on and looked at the doctor with his hand extended and said, "Doctor, I am your patient," in a Darth Vader voice. I wonder where he got his sense of humor? Face paints with rubber stamps work as well as the tattoos, if you are looking for another option. We have also done that as a surprise for the doctors.

Fun Activities

We have also been told numerous times that we were the first family they had seen with a camera. Joseph has to have pictures when he gets IVs placed or blood drawn, so we always have a camera. This is also something that has helped to alleviate anxiety. Both boys enjoy taking pictures of doctors, nurses, mom and dad all around the hospital. We have made silly videos while waiting and just had a great time. We've made two picture books with these pictures, as well. The boys had fun putting them together and making a scrapbook, too.

Compact board games and puzzle books are always a big hit. We found this compact five-in-one game set that is about the same size as one regular size board game. This has been a lifesaver at the hospital. Sometimes, when you are admitted over weekends or holidays, there are no Child Life staff available to get games, videos and toys for your child. We've been there many times! It is always best to be prepared for the times the staff is not available to help.



Another fun activity we enjoy is decorating the room. We write special messages on the message boards found in some rooms. We also hang up cards and other special items people send to the boys while they are in the hospital. Crayola makes a wonderful set of window markers called Window FX markers that we have really enjoyed a lot. You can color pictures on the windows to brighten up the room while also having fun. If you end up in a treatment room that has glass doors along with windows this can be extra fun! We used to spend one day each month at the hospital in a tiny treatment room and this activity was one of the boys' favorites. The boys would color on the windows and all of

the glass doors and brighten up the entire room. The best part is that these Crayola markers clean off the windows with water!

The last suggestion I have may not be an option at your child's hospital, but maybe you'll be the one to start the program. Pet therapy is a huge hit with both of my children. Our local children's hospital has pet therapy on a regular basis and this is by far the favorite hospital activity for both of my boys. They have been able to meet two different therapy dogs and the time spent was exciting and fun. Therapy dogs are trained and must pass tests before they are allowed in the hospital setting. It might be worth it to find someone who has a pet therapy dog willing to come to the hospital, if your hospital does not offer pet therapy.

If your child has an upcoming hospitalization you can make it somewhat enjoyable with a little prior planning. You can use some of these ideas or find inexpensive toys, games and crafts that are compact and easy to pack in your hospital bag. Before you know it, you will be laughing and playing while the time in the hospital flies by.

Pattie is a homeschooling mother of three. Two of her children have Shwachman-Diamond Syndrome. She received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from LSU in 1991. She worked as a social worker and served in the Louisiana Army National Guard.

