Preparing Your Child for Hospitalization or Surgery

*Elementary School (Ages 6 through 12)*

Preparation is a very important part of your child’s hospital experience. The following are some helpful tips to help prepare and support your child for her/his upcoming hospitalization.

- Prepare your child about five to seven days ahead of the visit. Find out what your child already knows. Allow your child the opportunity to ask questions, answer questions honestly and tell your child the reason for the hospital admission. Facts may be less frightening than your child’s exaggerated imagination of what might happen.

- Ask your child open-ended questions such as, “What are you wondering about your hospital stay/surgery?” Fear of body mutilation is common at this age, so let your child know what will look different after surgery. Prepare your child for seeing stitches or bandages. School age children often have complex questions. Encourage your child to write questions down and bring them to the hospital, if you don’t know how to answer them. If you need help answering your child’s questions, ask your child’s doctor, nurse or child life specialist.

- Use simple words to help your child understand (i.e.: a stretcher can be called “a bed with wheels” and anesthesia can be called “surgery sleep medicine.” Also explain that anesthesia means your child won’t feel anything during the operation). When you know, share with your child what tests she will have, who she will meet and what she could feel and be expected to do. Talk to your child about what he will be awake for and actively experience. It is less important to talk about medical details of surgery. Don’t be surprised if your child does ask for more detailed information, it is common at this age. All questions deserve honest basic answers.

- Let your child know that it is normal to feel nervous or frightened, and that crying is okay. Sometimes children under stress try to cope by acting out, behaving like a younger child or having other behavior changes. Encouraging your child to express his/her feelings will help. Talk to your child about ideas for dealing with frightening situations (relaxation ideas such as listening to music, deep breathing techniques, etc.)

- Having choices often helps children. Before coming to hospital, let your child choose favorite comfort items to bring to the hospital (pictures of family/friends, stuffed animal, games, music,
etc.). Letting your child participate and have choices in his/her care will help him/her feel more in control and less frightened.

- If your child spends the night in the hospital, there will be bedside activities and child life activity rooms available. These activities will allow him/her to play, to meet other children and stay in touch with friends from home. One parent will be able to stay with your child. We also encourage friends and siblings to visit and participate in these activities as well.