Preparing Your Child for Hospitalization or Surgery

Preschool (Ages 3 through 5)

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

• Talk to your preschooler in advance if possible. Three to four days ahead is usually ideal. It may help to explain that the hospital is where many children and adults go to get help from doctors to stay healthy and that sometimes people need to spend the night before they go home. Reassure your preschooler you will stay with him/her. Be aware that conversations about the hospital or diagnosis may be overheard by your preschooler and explanations may need to occur sooner than planned. Preschoolers have very active imaginations—what they imagine may be worse than reality.

• Play is how preschoolers learn. Playing hospital or doctor is very helpful. Use a toy doctor kit and dolls or stuffed animals to check temperature, “listen to your body” with the stethoscope, or drink medicine. Reading books about the hospital or a diagnosis can also be a good way to start a conversation. Check your library or a local bookseller. Be sure to review the book yourself before reading it to your child. You may need to explain what will be different about your child’s experience.

• When talking to your preschooler use simple language. For example: a stretcher can be called a “bed with wheels,” anesthesia can be called “surgery sleep medicine.” It is important to give concrete, simple information about what your child will see, hear, feel, taste and be expected to do. This helps minimize the fantasy thinking that often occurs when preschoolers do not understand what is happening.

• It is important to give your preschooler an explanation for why he/she is going to the hospital or having surgery, because preschoolers often view hospitalization as a punishment. For example, the doctor needs to remove your tonsils so you can breathe, and sleep, better at night.

• You might notice some regression in your preschooler’s behavior at the hospital. Temper tantrums, anger, aggression, guilt and fantasy thinking are all normal reactions. These behaviors might linger for a week or two after discharge.
To help your preschooler cope with the hospital:

➤ Offer choices when possible (for example, helping to choose items to bring to the hospital, giving the choice of having temperature or blood pressure checked first)

➤ Encourage expressions of feelings

➤ Help your child to participate in his/her own care

➤ If your child is being admitted, try to keep some sort of familiar routine while in hospital. For example, playtime in the morning, nap after lunch, read books before bedtime. These routines can be reassuring to your child.