

SUPPORTING YOUR TODDLER WHILE IN THE HOSPITAL



Dear Parents and Caregivers,

Having a sick toddler is very hard. You may feel scared, sad, or not sure of what to do. Some toddlers come to the hospital for planned medical treatment. Others come after being sick or getting hurt. Both of these ways can be tough for you and your toddler.

When toddlers are in the hospital, they can't always tell us how they feel with words. But they do show us through their actions. Some toddlers may:

- Have a few words to tell us when things hurt or when they feel scared, mad, or sad.
- Cry, scream, have emotional outbursts, or have a hard time calming down even with your help.
- Sleep more than usual or have a hard time sleeping.
- Become more clingy, not play with toys, or not respond like they usually do.
- Have different eating patterns (such as what they eat, how much they eat, and when they eat).

These are all normal ways toddlers show stress. Be gentle with your toddler and with yourself. Your love helps more than you know.

The **Early Connections team** wants you to know that you are not alone. We would like to offer support and a few tips to help during this tough time.



How Can Hospitals Be Hard for Toddlers?

Hospitals can feel scary or confusing for toddlers because of:

- Ouchy procedures (ones that hurt)
- Being away from family
- Strange and new places and people
- Not being able to move freely
- Loud machines and weird smells
- Changes in their daily routine
- Fewer choices for play
- Food they haven't seen or eaten before



What Are Signs That Your Toddler May Be Stressed?

Some signs are more clear, such as when your toddler is:

- Saying “No!”
- Hitting
- Crying or screaming and hard to calm even with your help
- Being more bossy or not listening
- Wanting to be close to you all the time
- Not able to be away from you even for a short time

Some signs are less clear, like:

- Acting younger
- Having accidents even if potty trained
- Crying without a clear reason
- Not wanting to eat
- Having a hard time sleeping or bad dreams
- Asking the same questions over and over
- Being very tired for no clear reason
- Being on high alert



What Can You Do to Help?

Your love is powerful. It helps your baby feel safe and start to heal.

Here are some ways to support your toddler:

- **Watch how your toddler acts.** If they seem scared, you can say something like, “That noise was scary, huh? It was the machine. We’re safe”.
- **Tell your toddler you will help them.** For example, “The nurse will put a band on your arm. You’ll be ready to play when it’s done. I’ll stay with you.”
- **Sing, read, or play.** Do something calming with your child during treatments or while you are at their bedside.
- **Don’t hold your child down.** Try these comfort positions to help your child during a procedure: [Comfort Positioning Guide](#)
- **Talk with the hospital staff.** Share what your toddler likes and what might help them feel better. For example, “This is [child’s name]. Watching Moana helps him feel calm. He likes to count out loud when the cuff hugs his arm.”
- **Name feelings.** Talk to your child about their feelings. You can say things like, “You were brave when the nurse put the oxygen under your nose.”
- **Leave something special.** If you must step away, leave something special with your toddler, like a blanket that smells like you, or a picture of them with people they love.
- **Keep a routine.** Try to keep a routine with reading, singing, drawing, and playing. This helps your child feel safe and gives them a chance to talk about their feelings.
- **Ask questions.** Ask questions about your toddler’s care. When you know what’s going on, it can help you feel better.
- **Bring familiar items.** Bring things from home that help you and your toddler feel more comfortable (like a favorite toy, pacifier, book, clothing, or snacks). Don’t forget to bring what you also need (like a phone charger, snacks, a soothing activity like knitting, or extra clothing).

How Do You Take Care of Yourself and Your Family?

You matter too. When you take care of yourself, you can take better care of your toddler.

Try these tips:

- **Take short breaks.** Go for a walk, eat something, or talk to someone you trust.
- **Breathe.** If you feel overwhelmed (that it gets to be too much), take deep breaths. Calm breathing helps your toddler feel calm too.
- **Talk to your toddler's siblings.** They may feel confused or worried. Let them know what's happening and ask how they're feeling.
- **Take notes.** It's okay to write down what doctors say and ask questions. There may be a lot of information that will take time to understand.
- **Share when you are ready.** Family and friends may ask questions. How and when you share information is up to you. Share what feels right to you with people who are helpful to you. It's also okay to not share with anyone.
- **You're not alone.** Your care team can connect you with people who help families. These are child life specialists, social workers, chaplains, or psychologists.

You are doing an amazing job! Your toddler feels your love, even in the hospital. Keep showing up, asking questions, and taking care of yourself. We're here to help every step of the way.



Where can I find online resources for more support?



At The Hospital: Helping My Child Cope - What Parents Can Do

Source: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/hospital-helping-my-child-cope-what-parents-can-do>



After The Hospital: Helping My Child Cope - What Parents Can Do

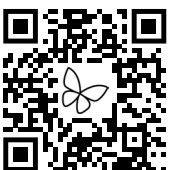
Source: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/after-hospital-helping-my-child-cope-what-parents-can-do>



The Meg Foundation

<https://www.megfoundationforpain.org/>



STEIN TIKUN OLAM EARLY CONNECTIONS PROGRAM CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL LOS ANGELES

4650 Sunset Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90027 • CHLA.org

Scan the QR code on the left for more resources from CHLA experts.