

Hospital Visits

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

The family dog bit Jerome clean through the hand. The hand swelled, bled profusely. It was everything Linda could do to keep her cool and rush her 18-month-old son to the hospital.

Once there, she could barely keep herself together. But she tried not to let the panic that welled inside her show. Jerome was scared enough. And she needed to keep her wits to make sure her son got prompt, proper care. The nurses and doctors, it seemed, considered Jerome just another patient in an endless line of injured and sick.

Linda's instincts were sound. Children who must go to the hospital need reassurance, calming, and someone to be their advocate.

That's more easily said than done, as any parent who has had such an experience knows. Hospital visits can be intimidating for parent and child alike.

Children must confront two fearful events. It's scary to be sick or injured, especially if their body is doing strange things like bleeding or throwing up. And hospitals are strange places with strange people doing strange things.

You can help by explaining what's going on, depending on the age of your child, and providing comfort.

Remain calm yourself. Stay with your child. Hold your child's hand. Be reassuring and caring. Try to hide your own concern, as hard as that may be to do.

When you know in advance that a hospital visit is necessary, you can help to prepare your child. Talk about the medical procedures that you know will be done. Explain in simple language what goes on in a hospital and that doctors and nurses are there to help your child. Don't deceive your child, but don't scare him or her either. Pack favorite pajamas, toys, or a stuffed animal. Listen to your child's questions and concerns.

And try to have at least one parent be with your child at all times, even over night, if necessary.

Hospitals are busy places. Mistakes in care are infrequent, but sometimes mistakes happen. Be your child's advocate. Monitor your child's care. Make sure medications given are the ones prescribed. Make sure your child gets attention when needed.

Be an advocate, but not a hindrance. Be vigilant about your child's care, but not unnecessarily overbearing. Work as a team member with the doctors and nurses. Most of all, be a comforting influence.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.