



# Helping Children Cope with Needles



**Children's  
Health Scotland**

Promoting the healthcare rights and needs of children and young people

Children's Health Scotland (CHS), formerly known as Action for Sick Children, is the only Scottish charity which promotes the needs of all sick children and young people within our healthcare system. We work for improved standards and quality of care for children and young people when they are ill in hospital, at home or in the community. We aim to represent their needs and those of their families and ensure that their voices influence health policy, planning and practice. We do this in partnership with parents, carers, professionals and children and young people themselves.

We work with children, young people and their families by giving healthcare information and support. We recognise the importance of quality, appropriate and timely information in helping sick children, young people and families to cope better with worrying or unknown situations.

Most children have immunisation injections during their childhood and some will have injections as part of medical treatment. It is very common for children to worry or to be frightened about needles and we hope this guide will support parents and carers to help their children to cope better with them. We hope it will answer some of the questions families may have. It can be read along with CHS's Helping Children Cope with Pain guide and used with any other information you receive from your GP, Nurse or hospital.

CHS is a member of the European Association for Children in Hospital (EACH) which has produced the EACH Charter. This sets out ten standards for children and young people's health care at time of illness. Hospitals are working towards meeting these standards.



CHS is grateful to its Family Participation Group and healthcare professionals for input to this booklet.

In this guide 'my child' and 'your child' refers to children looked after by birth parents and other carers for example foster and kinship carers.

This guide is an update to the guide we produced in 2014.



# Understanding Needles

## What do children think about needles?

Every child is different. Some think having a needle put into them is the worst thing about medical treatment. However, whether it is for immunisation, a blood test or an injection, needles are something most children will have to face, so it is good to know how to help.

## Is it normal for a child not to like needles?

Yes, needles can hurt so try and reassure your child. Many children worry about injections. Some put on a brave face and do not let on that it is sore in case it means they will get another. Let your child know that it doesn't matter if they show they are upset – even adults do this.

Some very vulnerable children can show extreme reactions to injections and to feeling pain. Children placed in care because of neglect or trauma can react like this. They will need a lot of reassurance and some may need specialist support to help them cope.

Some children may be scared because they have been warned needles are dangerous and not to touch them. Fear increases pain so it will help if you stay calm during your child's injection.

## What should I say to my child?

This depends on how old or mature they are or how they might react. In general it is best to explain things more fully to older children and to keep it simple for very young ones. But every child is different and you know your child best. All children need to know what to expect and will feel less upset if they are told why they need to have a procedure and if it may hurt. Remember to tell your child that injections will help.

Children's early experiences of needles could affect how they cope in the future, so it is best to prepare them as much as you can. Be as truthful as possible and involve the child where possible. Asking them if they want to hold your hand or sit on your lap, can make them feel more comfortable and in control. It is important your child knows that they can trust you.

## When should I talk to my child?

You know your child better than anyone else and you know best how they may react. It is usually better to speak to younger children not too far in advance – so it can be anything from three hours to three days before. It is up to you.



# How You Can Help

## How does listening to my child help?

Children have a right to be asked what they think about their treatment. Listen to your child's point of view. Tell the doctors and nurses if your child has any fears and worries and make sure that they take these seriously. If children have had a bad experience before, it helps them to know that their doctors and nurses will try to make it better for them this time. Being listened to can be comforting and help children to understand and respond better to their treatment.



## How can healthcare staff help?

Your child may have their injection at hospital, a GP's surgery or at a health centre. Wherever they are being treated, the more you can tell staff about your child, the better they can support them. At hospital a named nurse may be given the main responsibility to look after your child and to plan their care. Hospitals encourage shared care between parents/carers and the child's main nurse so everyone benefits from each other's experiences.

## Who can I talk to?

You can talk to your child's nurse or the health play specialist about your child's experiences with needles and any concerns you have. By working together you can find ways to reassure and support your child. Most hospitals admitting children have a play specialist or play leader. They can be of great help as they often have experience of helping children who fear needles. They can advise about how you can meet your child's needs and ease their worries. You can also talk to your GP or the practice nurse at your GP's surgery about your child.

It is common for parents to worry about their baby's first immunisation which takes place around or at the time of their eight week check, so speak to your health visitor about any concerns. The important thing to remember is to cuddle and reassure your baby during the procedure and not show if you are upset.



## Preparing Your Child

### What do we know about pain that can help?

We know that the more relaxed we are, the less pain we feel.

If we focus hard on something other than the pain, we can put a barrier between our mind and body which can help to lessen the pain.

These form the basis of special techniques which can be used to help children and give them more confidence.

### When should I start to prepare my child?

There are no set rules and you and/or your nurse should decide when the time is right. Start when your child is calm and relaxed by giving them an idea of what they will be expected to do during the procedure. Then use one of the specialist approaches described over the next few pages which you think will suit your child.

### Which approach is best?

Every child is different and there is not one approach that is best for all of them. If one method doesn't work, try another. The important thing is to find the right one for your child. Things to consider which may help include:

- ▶ What are my child's interests?
- ▶ Which method is most likely to help?
- ▶ When should I start?
- ▶ How often would my child need to practise?
- ▶ How much time do we have?

# Special Techniques to Help

## Distraction

This is a simple but powerful approach. It involves encouraging your child to concentrate on something else. By holding their attention and distracting them you will help them to feel less pain. Activities you use will depend on your child and their age. You can try telling stories, watching DVDs, listening to music, playing with games or puppets. The more you involve your child the better. Try deep breathing with your child or blowing bubbles. This can soothe and can also help you to keep calm, which will help your child.

## Ways to distract children

- ▶ singing and stroking
- ▶ counting
- ▶ reading pop-up books
- ▶ doing maths puzzles
- ▶ telling jokes
- ▶ playing games and puzzles
- ▶ watching TV or DVDs
- ▶ listening to music
- ▶ telling stories
- ▶ blowing bubbles





## Helping children to relax

The more relaxed children are, the less pain they are likely to feel. You could try using one of the following techniques. They are:

### Technique One

- ▶ Ask your child to squeeze your hand and breathe in
- ▶ Hold this position while you count to five
- ▶ Ask your child to slowly breathe out, relaxing the hold on your hand, while you count down from five to one
- ▶ Repeat a few times before and during the procedure.

### Technique Two

- ▶ Ask your child to imagine there is a feather on the back of their hand
- ▶ Encourage them to blow the feather gently enough to make it flutter.





## Using your child's imagination

This method is good for children with vivid imaginations. You can practise this at any time and remind your child to do so just before the procedure. Many hospital staff teach children and parents 'mind-over-body' methods which help children deal with pain. Someone in your hospital may be able to help you begin. Here are some useful examples:

- ▶ Before an injection or blood test ask your child to imagine putting on a special long glove that blocks the pain.
- ▶ If the child is very young tell them a story about one of their toys who is sick and needs an injection to help.
- ▶ Ask your child to give their teddy or doll lots of injections.



## What if my child has a more serious problem with needles?

Then there are more complex methods available which can help. These are only available in certain specialist units which have specially trained staff. If you are interested, your child's main nurse or consultant should be able to help.

**Supervised Play:** Children are encouraged to handle syringes in the playroom under the supervision of trained staff, usually a health play specialist. They play at being 'doctors and nurses' with special teddies and soft dolls, sometimes using real needles to help overcome their fear and anxiety.

**Desensitisation:** This method is usually carried out by a psychologist. It aims to take away children's fear of needles by relaxing them and gradually letting them deal with their fear. Children may need several sessions before they are ready to have an injection.

**Hypnosis:** This is an alternative form of therapy which is carried out by a psychiatrist or psychologist. This helps children to relax and parents/carers can easily learn to help.

# On the Day

## What if my child cries while having the injection?

Don't worry. Nurses usually accept that it is normal for a child to cry or protest. It is also natural for you to feel upset if your child is frightened or distressed. However, it is important to stay calm. Children are very sensitive to how their parents feel and they will cope better if you are relaxed.

## How can I comfort my child?

Pain is much worse when children are scared, tense or tired. Stroking and cuddling may make them feel better. Sometimes all they want is to squeeze your hand while the pain is there. Just being there can help, so stay with them if that is what your child wants. If your child has to have an injection unexpectedly try and keep calm to reassure them. Distraction techniques and relaxation can help your child to cope.

## Is there anything my child can get to stop the pain?

You can ask for a local anaesthetic gel, cream or spray (topical anaesthetics) if you feel your child needs it. When applied to the skin, these numb the surface so the needle does not hurt so much. These take up to an hour to work so it is important to contact your doctor or the hospital before the child's appointment to arrange this.

For more information on topical anaesthetics, you can read the information sheet on the Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) website

<http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information-0/procedures-and-treatments/topical-anaesthetics>

Remember your child will feel more comfortable if:

- ▶ they are prepared before they have the injection
- ▶ you are honest with them about what is going to happen
- ▶ you tell them how long the procedure will last
- ▶ you describe the sensation they might feel
- ▶ you try to give them some control over what is happening
- ▶ you are there with them all the time and able to comfort them.

# Helpful organisations/information

**Children's Health Scotland** [www.childrenshealthscotland.org](http://www.childrenshealthscotland.org) Tel: 0131 553 6553

## **Helping Children Cope with Pain Guide**

<https://www.childrenshealthscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Helping-children-cope-with-pain.pdf>

**Hospichill:** <http://hospichill.net/> a free APP from AppleStore which has visualisation and relaxation tools

## **Hospital Playbox to help prepare children**

<https://www.childrenshealthscotland.org/resource/hospital-playboxes/>

## **Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust**

Tel: 020 7405 9200

**Distraction Therapy:** <http://gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information-0/procedures-and-treatments/distraction-therapy>

**Topical anaesthetics:** <http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information-0/procedures-and-treatments/topical-anaesthetics>

**Fear of Needles:** <http://www.gosh.nhs.uk/medical-information-0/procedures-and-treatments/fear-needles>

**My Hospital Passport:** Booklet designed in the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Glasgow to help children attending for treatment or procedures. Contains Bright Ideas cards including distraction and relaxation cards. Scottish hospitals with paediatric services have this booklet or a version of this which can be requested from the child's medical team, the Play Service or Paediatric Psychology Service.

You can find a hospital passport template for children with autism at:

<http://www.autism.org.uk/about/health/hospital-passport.aspx>

**National Association of Health Play Specialists** [www.nahps.org.uk](http://www.nahps.org.uk)

**NHS Health Scotland** Tel: 0131 536 5500

## **Guide to Childhood Immunisation Up to 5 Years**

[http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/6016-A%20guide%20to%20childhood%20immunisations%20up%20to%20five%20years%20of%20age-July%202017-English\\_2.pdf](http://www.healthscotland.com/uploads/documents/6016-A%20guide%20to%20childhood%20immunisations%20up%20to%20five%20years%20of%20age-July%202017-English_2.pdf)

**Ready Steady Baby** online information resource on care of baby up to 12 months. <http://www.readysteadybaby.org.uk/growing-together/index.aspx> (this page leads to various pages which can be chosen by relevance)

Children's Health Scotland is the only charity in Scotland dedicated to informing, promoting and campaigning on behalf of the needs of ALL sick children and young people within our healthcare system.

For information in your language phone 0131 553 6553.

للحصول على معلومات بلغتك التي تتحدث بها، الرجاء الإتصال على هاتف رقم:  
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欲想索取閣下所操之語文資料，請致電 0131 553 6553。

Aby uzyskać informacje w Waszym języku, prosimy o kontakt pod numerem telefonu 01315536553.

Pentru informatii in limba dumneavoastra sunati la 0131 553 6553

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