

# The 7 Things You Should Know Before Your Child's Surgery

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**T**here is no way around it. When your child needs surgery, it can feel very stressful, both for you and your child. I vividly recall when my 2nd child needed a minor procedure for a blocked tear duct when he was 1 year old. Even though I am “in the business” and knew his procedure was so small that it almost couldn't be considered “real surgery,” I was still a nervous wreck! That was 11 years ago, but I still think about how I felt on the other side, as a parent of a child having a procedure. Even today, I try to keep that experience and others like it in mind as I discuss surgery with children and their families in my own practice. Combining my experiences as a parent with those in my role as a craniofacial surgeon, I have come up with 7 things I think all parents should know before their child's surgery.

## **1. You should like your surgeon, and if you don't, it's OK to choose another one.**

It may not be apparent when you are preparing for your child's surgery, but the relationship between you and your child's surgeon is often a long-lasting one. And just like any long-term relationship, there may be ups and downs, challenges, disappointments and exciting triumphs along the way. Because the relationship can be a lasting one, it is important to find a surgeon that you like – someone who is well-trained, whose philosophy you like and whose personality you are comfortable with. Don't be afraid to look around to be sure you like who you are with.

## **2. It is OK to ask a lot of questions so you can understand and feel comfortable with the surgical plan.**

It has been my experience that a great deal of family frustration and anxiety can be avoided after surgery by taking a lot of time before surgery to discuss the plan and the expected outcome. You should not feel rushed at your surgical consultation, and you should feel like you can get your questions answered before you sign-up for a procedure. To help you get the answers you need, be sure to come to the office with a list of your questions. Also, don't be afraid to call or email your surgeon after the visit if you have additional questions after you leave. (If you are anything like me, you will likely think of 5 more questions the moment you leave your surgeon's office!) Most committed, compassionate surgeons will welcome questions and will want you to feel comfortable with the plan.

## **3. Your surgeon can't promise a perfect outcome but can promise to be a partner through surgery and recovery, even if things don't go perfectly.**

No surgeon is perfect, and no surgeon never has a complication. However, your surgeon should be a fully committed partner with you who will stick with you, even when things don't go perfectly. Expect good communication and honesty, both when things go well and when things don't turn out as expected.

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empowering and giving hope to individuals and families affected by facial differences

#### **4. Involve your child in the decision making when possible.**

Although very young children can't participate in decisions regarding their surgeries, it is important to engage children as much as possible. I think that asking children for their input helps them feel a little more in control and can help decrease worry as they get closer to their days of surgery. I make it a habit to ask my young patients if they have questions, and I have frequently been surprised by the very smart questions they ask. If your surgeon doesn't ask your child for his/her input, you can encourage your child to participate by asking your child such simple questions as, "Do you understand what we're talking about?" or "Do you have any questions for the doctor?"

#### **5. It is OK to be your child's fierce advocate.**

Nobody cares for your child as much as you do. Don't be afraid to question a recommendation or a surgical plan that doesn't make sense to you. If you think something hasn't been addressed by your surgeon that you think should have been, say so. If your surgeon hasn't discussed alternative treatments or strategies, ask about them.

#### **6. You have a right to expect good communication from your surgical team.**

Perhaps I am just being repetitive on this theme of communication. Nevertheless, you should expect to be able to reach your surgeon with concerns you have before surgery or in the post-operative period. Surgery is stressful enough without the added headache of not being able to reach your surgeon when you have a concern. If your surgeon is not easy to reach, be persistent and know that this is OK. It's your right to expect good communication.

#### **7. It is OK to seek a second opinion.**

I frequently tell my patients that it is OK to seek a second opinion if they would like. Reasons for

seeking a second opinion may include uncertainty about what is the right surgical plan, not feeling comfortable with your surgeon or simply wanting to be sure that multiple experts agree on what is the right plan for your child. Sometimes it seems families worry that seeking a second opinion may offend me. Not so! If I were considering a major surgery for my own child, I would not hesitate to seek a second opinion (or even a third) to be sure that I was getting the best advice. If your surgeon is confident, capable and well-trained, he or she won't be offended either.

As a surgeon, I can't always make surgery a stress-free experience. However, by focusing on establishing a good relationship, taking time to answer questions and encouraging good communication, I firmly believe the experience can be much better for you and your child.

# A Surgeon's Tips for a Speedy Recovery After Your Child's Surgery

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**W**hen a child needs surgery, all parents want a smooth recovery and a quick return to normal. Many factors can affect your child's recovery from a surgical procedure. Some of those factors relate to the procedure being performed – bigger, more complex surgeries, for instance, may require more time to recover and may cause more discomfort. However, there are some things that you can do to help your child have the best possible recovery after an operation.

First and foremost, be prepared. Often, preparation for your child's surgery includes setting expectations. Let them know that they will be sore and how long that may last. Let them know if they are expected to have a lot of swelling and how long it will take for that to resolve. If they will have dietary restrictions (soft foods only, for instance), make sure they know this and talk about why that will be important. If activity will be restricted, let them know, and take some time to find activities your child will enjoy while they are limited. For younger children, providing love and encouragement is important, even if they may not fully understand what is happening. You cannot over prepare! Be creative and involve your child as much as possible.

And while we are talking about preparation, also consider how you will prepare your family as a whole for the challenges of caring for a child after surgery. Siblings may need to know what to expect so they won't be frightened or react negatively when your child comes home from the hospital. Also remember that siblings can often feel forgotten when another child is getting all the

attention after an operation. Consider providing special treats or activities for the siblings so they feel included and appreciated. Scheduling special parent time with siblings may also be a good idea. While paying attention to the siblings may not directly speed your child's recovery, a happier family environment may.

Once the operation is over and you are back home, encourage your child to participate in normal routines as much as possible. Even though activities may be restricted, it should be your goal to engage your child in doing all the normal things that he or she can do. In my opinion, the more normal the routine, the more quickly they will feel better. And being active will also help soreness and swelling to resolve more quickly.

Next, it is important to eat. I have observed that children don't always want to eat after an operation. Sometimes this is due to pain. Sometimes there are dietary restrictions. Sometimes, they just feel "bummed" and don't much feel like eating. However, it is important to get adequate protein and calories to promote healing and enough fluids to stay hydrated. You can help by encouraging your child to eat more frequent, smaller meals. It may also be a good idea to stock-up on things you know your child loves before surgery. Be sure you discuss with your surgeon what food restrictions your child may have as you are preparing for surgery. Your surgeon may also be able to offer some advice on what types of foods work best for children having your particular type of surgery.

Finally, take time to take care of yourself. It has been my experience that children can sense the

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stress and worry of their parents, and this often amplifies their own fear and anxiety. As a parent, I understand fully that it is impossible for a parent not to worry or feel scared from time to time. You are a parent. It is your job to be concerned. However, if you feel yourself getting overly emotional or you think you may be showing your own fear or worry in a way that is increasing your child's anxiety, take a time out. Consider finding a babysitter for a couple of hours. (As a father of 7 kids, I swear this can make a world of difference!) You might also join an online parent support group (\*please see groups below) with parents who have been through what you are facing. Sometimes just talking things through will help you to feel better. Finally, make sure you are getting good sleep. Exhaustion makes everything feel harder, and a good night's sleep goes a long way toward making even the hardest challenges feel more manageable.

Being a parent of a child who is recovering from surgery is hard. You need to bring your "A-game." And by preparing well, creating a happy home environment and making sure that both patient and parents are eating well and getting some rest, you will ensure the best possible recovery.

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