

pain management in children – a surgeon’s perspective

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Pain management after surgery in children can be a real challenge, particularly in the youngest patients who can’t always tell you how they feel. There are many barriers to treating pain effectively, including inadequate tools to assess pain in children, physician or parent concerns about adverse reactions to stronger pain medications and the fact that even children that are similar ages may be at very different developmental stages.

Despite these challenges, however, we recognize that it is important to effectively treat pain.

Failure to do so can be very traumatic to children (and adults!), and we know that one bad pain experience can lead to an exaggerated pain response later, even for minor, minimally painful procedures. So, here are some important things to consider in treating pain in children after their surgical procedures.

Anxiety:

Anxiety and fear are significant contributors to how children perceive pain. In order to best treat your child’s pain after surgery, the anxiety component needs to be addressed. This may involve using anti-anxiety medications in addition to (or instead of) more traditional pain medications. Anxiety can also be reduced by something as simple as holding your child or providing a familiar toy or comfort item. Music can also be soothing. Remember that you know your child best. Be creative in thinking of ways to decrease anxiety. This will always help with pain control.

Environment:

Another way to help to reduce pain and anxiety is to create a comfortable, soothing, pleasant environment. This is true both in the hospital and at home. It is my opinion that keeping the

environment quiet and free of loud distractions is very important. While in the hospital, consider talking to your doctors and nursing staff to request that in-room disturbances (such as checking vital signs, checking urine output and computer charting) be kept to a minimum. You should also give some thought to how you may want to limit visitors. Be observant and talk to your care team about ways to create the most restful, least disruptive environment possible. Be your child’s best advocate.

Distraction:

In my own home, I have often found that minor injuries can cause a lot of moaning and wailing until something more interesting happens that turns my child’s attention away from the hurt. This is also true for surgical or procedural pain. Distractions like bubbles, videos, games, colorful projections and light wands help to distract and calm children. Your children’s hospital likely has a wide variety of distraction activities available. Be sure to seek these out. Also, don’t hesitate to come prepared with your own distracting activities.

Child Life Specialists:

Most hospitals have child life specialists. These are specialists whose job it is to help your child get through hard or unpleasant experiences in the hospital, such as a minor surgical procedure, placement of an IV or an xray study. Utilizing child-life specialists is valuable in preparing children, teaching children how to self-soothe and cope and providing family support. Child life specialists may also choose to give your child a role or a job during the procedure to give them something constructive to focus on. It has been my

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experience that utilizing a child life specialist can be tremendously valuable in helping make sometimes difficult experiences much easier.

Don't be afraid to treat the pain:

Although I make an effort in my own practice to minimize narcotic prescribing, I still feel it is important to treat pain with pain medications. I have had a few families who worry that by allowing their children to have narcotic pain medications, they may be doing something dangerous or may be exposing their child to the risk of addiction. However, responsible use of narcotic pain medications to treat pain rarely results in dangerous complications or addictions. Don't be afraid to treat pain when pain is present. Failure to treat pain may be more damaging than using appropriate medications when needed. You can and should seek to use distraction, environment and anti-anxiety medications as adjuncts in controlling pain so that stronger pain medications can be used less frequently. However, you should not be afraid to treat the pain.

Treating post-surgical pain in children can be challenging. Remember that any pain management strategy needs to include creating a favorable environment, using age-appropriate distractions, involving child life specialists and prescribing appropriate medications. By using all of these strategies together, the painful parts of surgery and recovery can be made a little easier for you and your child.

For more information in managing acute pain in children, please see the clinical report from the American Academy of Pediatrics titled "[Relief of Pain and Anxiety in Pediatric Patients in Emergency Medical Systems.](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/5/e1391.full.pdf)" <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/5/e1391.full.pdf>