

A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Cope With Immunizations



Parents as Health Care Partners

The best way to prevent your child from becoming overly stressed or frightened by immunizations is to remain calm and confident. Your child will pick up on your feelings and behaviors. Ask questions and educate yourself about immunizations, so you can learn how best to support your child.

Preparation

You are the best judge of how much preparation your child needs to cope with this potentially stressful situation. Timing will depend greatly on the child and his or her coping style. A child who needs a lot of processing time can be told a few days before the scheduled immunization. Whereas, a very anxious child may cope best if told just moments before the immunization is administered. We suggest you provide honest information to your child, but use words that are developmentally appropriate. When preparing your child, get down on eye level and offer appropriate information based on the child's ability to understand.

Choices

Offer your child realistic choices to help him or her feel a sense of control and partnership in the experience. For example, you can ask your child questions such as:

- Would you like to bring a favorite blanket or stuffed animal to hold?
- Would you like to listen to music, look at a book or sing songs during the poke?
- Do you think it would be better to watch or look away during the poke?
- Would you like to sit on the bed or on my lap?

Positioning

Parents can help securely hold their child during immunizations using "positions of comfort." Your health care provider can help position you and your child together in the safest and most supportive way.

Distraction

Use distraction to help your child focus on something positive during the procedure. Begin using distraction before the nurse enters the room and continue throughout the procedure. Books, music, songs, bubbles, I Spy™, hand-held games and toys with light or sound are all great distraction tools. If you do not have access to distraction toys, talk, tell stories or use the environment around you as a diversion.

Positive Feedback

Let your child know specifically what he or she did well during the procedure. For example, you could say, "I really love how you held so still for your poke. You were very brave," or "I am so glad you let me hold you during your poke. We made a good team, don't you think?"

Frequently Asked Questions by Children

Below are frequently asked questions by children and examples of how to respond from the child life specialists at Helen DeVos Children's Hospital.

Q: Am I going to get a shot?

A: Yes, you will be getting a small poke today at the doctor's office or health department.

Q: What will it feel like?

A: Most kids say it feels like a little pinch when the medicine goes on.

Q: Will it hurt?

A: Maybe a little, but only for a very short time.

Q: How many pokes will I be getting?

A: The doctor told me you will need two different kinds of medicine on your arms today.

Q: Why do I have to get a poke?

A: The medicine they give in the poke will keep you healthy while playing with other kids. All kids and even grown-ups get this medicine.

Q: Why can't I take the medicine in my mouth?

A: This kind of medicine doesn't work when you drink it.