



How to Best Serve Children with Autism Spectrum and Sensory Processing Disorders in the Hospital Environment

The hospital can be a scary place for children. When children have a difficult time regulating their emotions or processing the things that they hear, touch, see, and smell it can be very overwhelming. The following are tips on how to help these children succeed in this environment.

Characteristics and behaviors to expect:

Every child is unique and may or may not display these behaviors

- Impaired verbal/nonverbal communication
- Fail to interpret facial cues, body language, voice inflections, gestures, sarcasm, and comparisons
- Not want to engage in conversation
- Talk about unusual subjects
- Not answer direct questions
- Difficulty processing information
- Have trouble making and keeping eye contact (may look away or past a person to better listen)
- Prefer visual directions or instructions over verbal ones
- Need to have questions repeated multiple times
- Perform repetitive behaviors
- Prefer structure and routines
- Need explanations for transitions and changes in schedule
- May be sensitive to sensory stimuli
- Easily overwhelmed and anxious
- Fail to realize that choices are available if not specifically stated
- Have difficulty regulating emotions
- Easily trigger into a meltdown

Helpful Tips:

- Stay calm- take a deep breath before entering the room
- Keep your energy level low
- Keep the noise level in room as low as possible
- Limit the number of medical staff in the room at one time
- Use the one voice and one person principles
- Use soft or dim lighting

Helpful Tips Continued...

- Use concrete, concise, and clear information and language
 - *Ex. Instead of saying "This cold spray will feel like snow" say "cold spray now"*
- Give specific choices that are available and appropriate
 - *Ex. Instead of saying "What do you want to drink with your medicine?" Say "Do you want apple juice or water with your medicine?"*
- Give direct requests
 - *Ex. Please sit here.*
- Avoid sarcasm, humor, and comparisons
- Give advance notice on delays in routine if possible
- Explain what you are doing before you do it
 - *If possible, practice steps on a doll or stuffed animal first so that child has time to process*
- Talk to the parents- they are the experts
- Get on child's eye level
- Try to make eye contact with child at initial meeting

Safety Tips:

- Keep feet planted firmly on ground and angled side ways to child
- If child bites your arm- Push your arm into child's mouth to release it
- If child pulls your hair-Place your hand on top of the child's hand to release child's grip
- Be prepared to work with child anywhere that he/she feels comfortable- floor, bed, chair, parents lap, etc.

How Child Life can help:

Provide:

- Preparation for procedures
- Emotional support
- Medical play
- Procedural support and distraction
- Individualized coping plan and plan of care
- Social stories
- Visual supports
- Sensory toys

Please page your Child Life Specialist or call the Child Life referral line at 312-227-3270 for additional support and assistance.