Helping Preschool Age Children Cope with Pain

In addition to medications, preschool-age children may benefit from using these strategies to manage pain that is unique to their developmental needs, medical status, and caregiver availability.

How Preschoolers Develop: 3-6 Year Olds

- Preschool age children learn by exploring, playing, and engaging in activities to socialize with their peers.
- Preschool age children fear having no control. They develop a sense of power by mastering skills through play.
- Preschool age children gain self-esteem from feeling capable and by demonstrating new skills.
- Preschool age children are developing control over their bodies and expect normal routine in their environment. Disruption in normal routine and unfamiliar environments may be troubling to development.
- Preschool age children learn to trust themselves from trusting the environment and people around them. They look to caregivers and familiar people for guidance, security, and support.

How Preschoolers Perceive and Express Pain

Preschool-age children may be hesitant to admit pain if they view it as a punishment, or if they fear the treatment.

- A preschooer’s development allows for opportunities to create positive experiences that will help to shape future experiences.
- Experiencing severe restrictions, changes in routine, feelings of unpredictability, and/or the loss of control may cause preschoolers to regress to earlier and more secure levels of their development.
- Pain is a personal experience that can be difficult for a child to express. Share with the medical team any known words (“owie”, “booboo”, “ouchie”, “hurt”) and/or signs your child uses to communicate pain.

Helping Preschoolers Cope

- **Familiar Person/Parental Presence**
  - Include parents or a familiar person in preparation, comforting holds for support, and distraction as it allows the child to feel safe

- **Preparation/Medical Play**
  - Explain procedures using simple, honest language
  - Provide sensory information with an opportunity for medical play to prepare for the procedure
  - Speak at eye-level with the child
  - Incorporate play to reduce stress and create an opportunity for education
Helping Preschoolers Cope (continued)

- **Offer Appropriate Choices**
  - Provide an option to watch the procedure, if the child is interested
  - Allow the option for the child to sit on a bed or chair with a caregiver

- **Comfort Positions**
  - Offer opportunities to provide a supportive hold, instead of restraining the child. This reduces stress and provides comfort during procedures
  - “The Hugging Hold” - this position allows for the child and adult to be in a “hugging hold”. The hold can be used facing the procedure or facing away, using distraction (give the choice to look or to be distracted)

- **One Voice**
  - Allow for one voice heard during procedure to limit excessive noise

- **Positive Reinforcement**
  - Offer encouragement and praise throughout the procedure, and continue to use simple language like “a small poke”, “you are a great listener”

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**Distraction During a Painful Procedure**

*Active distraction allows the preschooler to be involved in the experience while re-directing their attention towards an item or activity.*

- Slow, rhythmic breathing – Bubbles, toy whistles, party blowers, pinwheels, harmonicas
- “Blowing shot pain away” – Blow out air repeatedly during injection as if they were blowing bubbles
- Utilizing light-up or interactive toys
- Tablet
- I spy books/sheets
- Sing songs, playing music


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Please call your Child Life Specialist for further non pharmacological pain management strategies and support for medical procedures at 312.227.3270.