How to Talk to Kids About Pain

Helping your child manage their pain at the hospital

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Most children in hospital have pain. All children should know that pain goes away and that many kids have pain like they do.

You and your child will work together with the hospital’s health-care team to manage pain. Feel free to ask questions and talk about your child’s pain with staff.

The following information also helps families learn ways to talk about pain and lists the tools that can help you and your child manage their pain.

**Ways to measure pain**

“How does it feel?”

“How much does it hurt?”

“Where does it hurt?”

These are some of the questions staff at the hospital may ask to learn more about your child’s pain.

It is important for your child to be able to tell you or a member of their health-care team about their pain so it can be treated and your child will feel better. As your child knows their own pain best, we need to find a way to help them describe it. The tools most often used at The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) are: a faces scale or a number scale (see charts below).

![Faces Scale](image)

The faces scale is used with younger children who understand pictures better than numbers.

![Number Scale](image)

The number scale is used with children who are school age and older because they understand numbers and its values.
More ways to measure pain

If these scales don’t work well for your child, pick a theme that they enjoy or can relate to such as colours, animals, shapes. Have your child choose the item that describes their kind of pain.

| No pain |  |  |  | the most pain |

Other signs your child is in pain

Sometimes children cannot use a scale to rate their pain. There are other signs that you can look for in order to tell that your child is in pain.

- Not playing
- More quiet than usual
- Going back to using younger behaviours such as thumb sucking or wetting the bed
Coping Strategies

Once you've determined the level and intensity of your child's pain, you can work at finding different strategies to manage that pain. There are many coping techniques to assist in managing a child's pain. Together with your child, read the coping strategies below and whenever possible, have your child decide which technique would work best for them:

**Breathing** - Deep breathing helps manage pain by relaxing your body. This works best when you breathe slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to make each breath last for the count of 5. You can use your imagination by picturing blowing out all the candles on your birthday cake or blowing up a balloon. Another fun and handy tool to help with deep breathing is to blow BUBBLES!

**Imagination** - Using your imagination reduces anxiety and pain and will make you feel more calm and relaxed. Make up a story together, talk about your favourite place or thing, or remember and discuss a special time in your life.
* This strategy is best used with school aged children 6 -12 years old.

**Relaxation** - Relaxation is good for pain that doesn't seem to want to go away. Find a comfortable position with your arms & legs outstretched. Starting at your head, think about each body part all the way until you get to your toes. Imagine your body getting heavier and heavier until it is hard to lift any part of your body. This works best when you keep your breaths long, deep and slow. Take your time and stay relaxed.
* This is ideal for pre-teens and teens!

**Distraction** - Distraction is a good way to focus attention away from pain and onto something familiar, safe and enjoyable. Choose an activity such as reading, arts & crafts, puzzles, board games, movies or video games.

**Redirection** - Redirection helps you think more positively about your body and how it feels. Which parts of your body do not hurt?

* Child Life Specialists know many more tricks and techniques to help children manage their pain. If you would like to learn more, please talk to the Child Life Specialist for your program.
**Tools**

Distraction tools are known to help children manage their pain. These are items that can be used during potentially painful or stressful situations or to manage ongoing pain. You know your child best, so together with your child, decide which distraction items they would like to try.

**Distraction tools:**
- Magic wands
- Bubbles
- Light up toys
- Singing
- Music
- A favourite object (such as a stuffed animal)
- Picture books
- Videos
- Joke books
- Squishy balls
- Playdough
- Pinwheels
- Search & find books
- Word & name games

**Resources**
Child Life Specialists find the following books to be helpful:

* A Child in Pain by Leora Kuttner


* Keys to Parenting your Anxious Child* by Katharina Manassis

The About Kids Health Family Resource Centre, located on the main floor of The Hospital Sick Children across from Shoppers Drug Mart, has all of the books listed above. Skilled staff and volunteers are available to assist you in your search. For hours of operation call 416-813-5819.

The following Web sites have great information for children and families about managing pain.

- [www.sickkids.ca](http://www.sickkids.ca) (select comfort tools and then comfort kit)
- [www.kidshavestressstoo.org](http://www.kidshavestressstoo.org)
- [www.aboutkidshealth.ca/PNHome.asp](http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/PNHome.asp)

**References**