

Behavior changes in preschool age children (3 to 5 years old)



Your child may show changes in behavior during and after their hospital stay. As a parent, these changes may concern you. Please know that some of these changes are normal and most often go away with time.

The changes listed below are normal behaviors for this age group. Your child may have already “outgrown” a behavior and then it comes back. Or, a behavior may happen more often than normal. These may be how your child reacts to stress.

This age group fears:

- Being left alone.
- You leaving.
- Feeling pain.
- Getting in trouble. (This age group may view the hospital as punishment.)

What changes could I see in my child?

Your child may have one or more of these behaviors:

- Fears you leaving
- Clings to you more
- Asks for help with things they once did without help
- Temper tantrums
- Bedwetting
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes in sleep patterns (may have nightmares)
- “Baby talk” or thumb sucking

What can I do to help my child?

Here are some tips that may help you and your child:

- Give your child time to play. Play is a way a child can learn, feel in control and express how they feel.
- Help your child express their feelings through play. You can use things like Play-Doh, pots and pans (for banging), finger paint, dress-up and water play.
- Talk to your child about why they are in the hospital. Tell them what part of their body the doctor is trying to help.
- Let your child know you will take them home (if true).
- If you leave, tell your child where you are going and when you will be back. They may be upset, but they will learn to trust that you will come back.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Behavior changes in preschool age children, continued

- To help your child while you are away, give them an item of yours to keep until you come back. This may be a picture, keys or shirt.
- Plan family activities and one-on-one time.
- Let your child do tasks on their own. Help them if needed.
- Have patience with your child, but set limits and discipline as you normally would once you go home.
- Have your child play “doctor” or “nurse”. Let them pretend that dolls or puppets are the patients. This may help them express how they feel about the hospital.
- Be honest about pain. Play is a great way to help a child cope with pain. Let them know the doctor will give them medicine to help them feel better.
- Let your child know they did not do anything wrong to make themselves sick (if true).

Remember these changes in behaviors are common and most often go away. This is your child’s way of trying to cope with their hospital stay. If you have concerns or questions before you leave the hospital, please talk with a nurse, doctor or child life specialist.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child’s doctor or a member of your child’s healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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