My Heart Operation

Developed by Karen Weir
Child Life Therapy Department
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Note for families

Having an operation can be a frightening, overwhelming and confusing prospect for children of all ages.

It is normal to worry about when and how much to tell your child about their upcoming admission. Many parents attempt to hide the truth thinking that by doing so it will make the experience easier and less scary for their child. In actual fact, children will be more frightened if caught by surprise. If they are not given honest and accurate information, they may also invent their own explanations which can be more frightening than the reality. Good preparation has been shown to reduce anxiety and facilitate coping.

Reading this book with your child will support them to gain an understanding of what they will see, hear and experience on the day of surgery as well as throughout their stay. You can help your child by encouraging them to talk about the pictures, ask questions and discuss how they are feeling.

If you are not sure how to respond to your child’s questions or would like further advice about age-appropriate ways to prepare them for their upcoming hospitalisation please contact the Child Life Therapy department on (02) 9845 3717.
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Hi! My name is Ellis.

I am three years old.
My favourite things are Superman and playing doctors.
Today I am having an operation to help my heart work better.

When we arrive at the hospital we go to Middleton Ward. We take a glass lift to get there!

I have brought my favourite toys, Baby and La-La, from home along with me. Do you have something special you could bring to hospital?
When we arrive at Middleton Ward we take a seat at the desk and mum fills out some forms.

I sit on dad’s lap while I am waiting.
I am shown to a bed where a nurse greets me and takes my temperature, blood pressure, oxygen levels and weighs me. This will happen lots more times while I’m in hospital!
Some special bracelets with my name and birthday are put onto my arm and leg. This is so everyone knows who I am while I am in hospital.
I feel a little hungry. I won’t be able to have anything to eat or drink for a short time because the doctor wants my tummy to be empty for the operation.

I make a collage so I don’t think about it too much. What things could you bring from home to do?
The doctor and nurse who will give me the sleepy medicine come to see me. They are wearing special clothes called scrubs. These keep everything clean and free of germs.

The nurse checks the bracelets on my arm and leg to see if my name and birthday are correct.
I am given some medicine to help me relax. I can have a small drink of water or apple juice after.

The nurse tells me I might feel a little tired so I will need to rest in bed.
It’s time for my operation and my bed is wheeled to the operating room. My mum can come with me. She needs to wear scrubs too. Doesn’t she look funny?
I have to wait for a few minutes in the anaesthetic bay. The anaesthetist shows me the mask which he will put over my mouth and nose. The mask contains some medicine that will make me sleep very deeply so I don’t see, feel or hear anything during the operation.
The gas in the mask might smell funny. I have brought a lip balm from home to wipe inside the mask.

When the anesthetist puts the mask onto my face it feels soft and squishy. It also smells delicious! I take some deep breaths and soon I fall asleep.
Another way you might choose to get this medicine is through a cannula.

This is a small plastic straw that the anesthetist will slide into the back of your hand.
Once I am asleep I am taken into the operating theatre where the doctors and nurses work together to fix my heart.

My mum and dad are shown a special place close by where they can wait.
After my operation, I am taken to intensive care to recover.

As my heart gets better, the anesthetist slowly stops giving me the sleepy medicine and I begin to wake up.

I am very happy to see my mum and dad there when I open my eyes.
When I wake up I have an oxygen mask on my face to help me breathe more easily while I am recovering. Soon the mask is taken off and I have nasal prongs instead. These are a bit ticklish!
I also notice some other things...

There is a line on my chest where the doctors made an opening to fix my heart. This is covered with a clear band-aid.

Did you know some people call this a zipper scar?

You might already have a scar like this if you have had an operation before.
I have some plastic tubes in my chest. These were put in while I was in a deep sleep so I didn’t feel anything.

They are attached to plastic boxes and remove any air or liquid from around my heart that my body doesn’t need.

They will be taken out before I go home.
I feel a little sore but this is normal. The nurses and doctors will give me medicine through a tubes in my arm and neck to help me feel better.

The medicine will make me feel a little sleepy.

The machines with the medicine in them look like this...
After my operation I’m only allowed to drink a little bit. This is so my heart doesn’t have to do too much work while it’s getting better. I am given special star sponges dipped in water to suck on. They look a bit like lollipops. I can also suck on some ice chips or an ice-block. Soon I will be able to drink more.
When it is time to move to Edgar Stephens Ward some of my tubes are removed. Others stay a little longer.

I am wheeled to my new room. You might have your own room or share with some other children who have had heart operations.
My mum and dad take turns to stay with me overnight. There is a special chair that turns into a bed where they sleep. Their bed is not as comfortable as mine!

Who will be staying with you?
There is some yucky stuff called secretions in my chest. I can’t cough properly at the moment so a physiotherapist visits me each day and shows me some other fun ways to get rid of these. One of these activities is blowing bubbles. I am very good at this!

I also go for short walks to places like the fish tank.
The Child Life Therapist visits me and I can do all kinds of fun things like art, puzzles and games.

She can also help during dressing changes. Dressings are the bandaids on my chest. We can choose great ways to cope each time the bandaids are taken off and put back on.
There are also lots of games and activities in the playroom at the end of the corridor. You nurse will be able to tell you when you can visit this area.
I have lots of other visitors too including the Clown Doctors, therapy dogs and Starlight Captains.
Before I go home, I have another echo and ECG. I’ve had these before in the Pre-Admission Clinic!
The doctors say my heart is better so I can go home.

I must not forget to collect my heart beads before I leave to show everyone how brave I have been.

I will have to come back soon for a check up.

Bye everyone!
For more information visit www.heartcentreforchildren.com.au