



by Karen Stephens

Doctor Visits: Tips for Preparing Children

Routine doctor visits are a great way to encourage a lifetime of health-wise habits. And they encourage a warm, trusting relationship between you, your child, and your physician. When doctors have ample opportunities to see your child when well, they're better able to detect subtle symptoms that may indicate problems. Noting small changes in coloring, alertness, eye clarity, or energy lead to better diagnosis and treatment.

Parents who conscientiously make the time for regular check ups — for themselves as well as children — allow kids to see responsible self-help skills in action. By your actions they witness the major role individuals play in protecting and maintaining their own health.

It's true: an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Regular check-ups fill the bill. When small problems are spotted early, they can be treated and stopped in their tracks, before they become serious and disabling. That saves not only children's pain and suffering, but also valuable household income.

Common sense tells us unexpected doctor visits or emergency room trips are traumatic for kids. But even run-of-the-mill check-ups cause anxiety, fear, and dread. To help calm those trepidations, follow these tips for preparing children for doctor check-ups. Parenting Exchange column, "Hospital and Emergency Room Visits: Tips for Preparing Children" addresses even more emotionally charged situations.

This column's tips will help children deal with the anticipation of a doctor's visit as well as the actual exam. Tailor the suggestions to your child's age, temperament, and previous experience. Your pediatrician can give you excellent suggestions, too.

- When possible, take a younger child along to an older sibling's (or cousin's) routine check-up, preferably one that won't involve a shot. Keep in mind that it's courteous and respectful to ask the older child's permission.
- No one likes a rude awakening. Let your children know about their doctor's appointment a day or two in advance. A week's notice is too long for young kids, because they forget easily, and a week gives school-age children too much time to fret and worry.
- In simple language explain the purpose for the check-up. When children understand what it's about, they are more inclined to cooperate.
- Don't be a phony, but do present the check-up as a positive experience. Be upbeat. Portray your doctor as a likeable friend who will help your child stay well so he can play and learn. Do whatever you can to promote a congenial relationship between your child and doctor. It makes a world of difference in your child's attitude, comfort, confidence, and capacity to cooperate.
- Though you can't anticipate everything, briefly give an overview of what will likely happen during the check-up. During discussion, listen and respond to all questions. Some questions may seem silly, but don't giggle (at least not within your child's earshot). When misconceptions come to light, reassure your child of what will really happen.

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- Children are curious about equipment doctors use during an exam. When reading children's doctor books, point out typical instruments. Identify them by name. In simple language explain their purpose, such as a stethoscope is for listening to the heartbeat; a tongue depressor helps doctors see throat and tonsils; an otoscope checks eardrums.
- Explain sensations each tool may create on specific body parts. For instance, let a child know pressure will be felt when a rubber blood pressure cuff is wrapped around their arm and hand-pumped with air. Tell them the tight feeling is normal. Simulate the feeling by putting pressure on their upper arm with your hands or a towel.
- Young children learn best from first hand experiences that let them put their thoughts and ideas into action. Play is children's natural (and preferred) method of doing that. Toys that give kids opportunities to stage make believe doctor visits are a great way to help them explore the nuts and bolts of health care.
- Through play, children will act out or predict what they think might happen. By watching their play, you can affirm their accuracies as well as identify and clear up misconceptions. Responding to kids' play gives you an opportunity to answer questions little ones aren't able to articulate.
- There are a variety of ways kids can role-play a doctor visit. Give them art supplies, like shoe boxes, crayons, markers, scissors, and glue to create a pretend doctor's office. Their doll house people can then become doctors, nurses, and patients. You can make your own toy doctor or nurse bags; pre-packaged kits are available at toy stores.
- Many children's discovery museums have mini-doctor offices that allow children to playfully explore the tools of health care.
- Answer questions honestly. Don't fib just to keep the peace. Your child will feel twice as betrayed when the lie comes to light at the doctor's office.
- If a child asks if the doctor will give her a shot, tell the truth: yes or no. If you aren't sure, explain that the doctor will decide if one is needed. Tell them doctors know when shots are needed by a child's age or by diagnosing an illness.
- Empower children. Give children a little responsibility in the exam. If they're verbal, ask them if they'd like to record (or write) some questions for their doctor. Convey your confidence in their ability to cooperate. Show appreciation for the role they play in the exam's success.
- Though there are some reasons a doctor would want to see your child alone, for most visits, it's wise to reassure your child you will stay with them throughout the exam. In terms of getting used to a doctor's treatment, the less anxiety the better.
- Research has even shown that children who sit on a parent's lap (rather than away from their parent on a table) while receiving a shot or medicine show less anxiety. (Probably because they feel more safe and secure.)
- Be respectful of feelings. Praise kids for being brave. If tears surface, reassure them. Express your confidence in their ability to cope. Refrain from saying "big kids — or boys — don't cry." That's a lie that produces guilt, not courage and confidence. And saying "there isn't anything to cry about," is misleading. Indeed, there may be, but hopefully not for long.
- Schedule appointments so they are just one of several of the day's errands. Pairing the doctor visit with some time at the children's library will help balance out nervousness.

Children's Books About Doctor Visits

Children's books are great discussion starters. The illustrations will also help children visualize what to expect. (Books on emergency care and hospitalization are shared in the column mentioned above.)

- *Going to the Doctor* by T. Berry Brazelton, MD. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 1996.
- *The Doctor's Office* by Gail Saunder-Smith. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press, 1998.
- *Next! Please* by Christopher Inns. Berkeley, CA: Tricycle Press, 2001.
- *The Berenstain Bears Go To The Doctor* by Stan & Jan Berenstain. New York,: Random House, 1981.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.