

EPIC



Effective Peri-procedural Communication

My child is afraid of needles, what to do? Tips and tricks for kids with a fear of needles

This article builds on "[How to Talk to Kids About Medical Procedures](#)".

Contents

1. What is a 'fear of needles'?
2. Changing how we talk about needles.
3. Making needles comfortable
4. Action! – an action plan for before the procedure
5. Useful resources

✓ Do's

- Learn about talking to kids
- Talk about the reason for the needle
- Give the needle a more useful name
- Talk about a plan to make this easier
- Offer the magic numbing cream
- Talk about ways to distract
- Plan a simple treat for when it is over

✗ Don'ts

- Pretend they're not having a needle
- Call it a needle if that is upsetting
- Use punishment or shame

1. What is a 'fear of needles'?

Many people don't like needles. That's fine, we don't need to like them. It's quite natural to avoid anything that might be uncomfortable. Some kids (and grownups) are also afraid of needles. This can range from being just a little afraid beforehand, to being so scared that they can't even go into the room.

When we're afraid, our body instantly reacts with a 'fight, flight or freeze' response. Chemicals are released in the brain which may lead to our heart fluttering, fast breathing, sweaty palms and sometimes feeling sick or fainting. For some kids this can feel uncontrollable, especially if they've been scared during other needles they've had.

A severe fear of needles can feel awful for a child. The fear is in a part of their mind that can be hard for them to control, the 'unconscious' mind. Explaining (for instance saying, 'this is good for you') or reassuring (for instance saying, 'don't worry, it's just a little sting') might not help much, because the unconscious mind responds to feelings more than it responds to talking. The unconscious mind also doesn't work in a logical way, that's why some people who have no trouble with piercings can still be very afraid of blood tests.

To help people with fear of needles take these steps:

- accept the fear is real
- explain the needle is to keep them safe and healthy
- use the tricks below (clickable)
- if you have a fear of needles yourself then all of this will help you too

2. Changing how we talk about needles.

This builds on the "do's and don'ts" you have already read about in : "[How to Talk to Kids About Medical Procedures](#)".

When we know someone needs a blood test, vaccine, or other needle, it helps if we don't use words like needle, sting, pain, vomit or faint. These words come with strong, uncomfortable feelings attached and can actually focus your child on those uncomfortable feelings.

Instead of needle: use a word that talks about what the needle is for

- *drip*
- *vaccine*
- *blood test*

Instead of sting/jab/sore/pain:

1. Say, 'it feels different to everyone, lots of people don't feel much at all, I wonder how comfortable it will be for you?'
2. don't talk about how *you think* it will feel for the child
3. focus on 'after it's finished...' (...it's a done deal)

3. Making needles comfortable.

CALM HELPS

Be calm and matter of fact about the whole thing

It's not just about the words you use. Kids actually react to your facial expression, posture and the tone and volume of your voice more than to what you say.

If you don't feel calm just pretend you are. Imagine how, if you *were* calm, you would stand, talk, move and breathe. Pretending works just as well as being, and will also help you feel calmer. Calm is catching! (so is fear...)

DISTRACTION

everything you focus on seems bigger, everything you ignore seems smaller

This is the key. You and your child can both focus on something else.

Here are some tips, or you can think up your own.

- Use the phone! Devices are your friend. This might be the time to finally let them have that new app or game they've been asking for.
- Imagine: imagination games can work like magic
 - they can imagine they're in a different place, somewhere they'd like to be. Chat about what they're doing there, what they see, hear, taste, smell and feel (tip: use the present tense).
 - Imagine they're holding an animal they like
 - Imagine their favourite toy is coming to life and playing with them
 - Imagine they're inside their favourite story, movie or book
 - Here's more information about using the imagination ([clickable link](#))
- Have a treat: eating something with sugar during the needle helps it feel comfortable
 - Lollipop
 - Icy pole
 - Ice cream
 - Slushy drink
- Blow on something! Blowing slows the out breath, which acts like a switch to turn on calm
 - Bubbles
 - A feather
 - A pinwheel

4. Make an Action Plan

Give your child control over everything that's appropriate for them to control.

1. What word will you use for the needle?
2. Will you use the magic numbing cream?
3. What will you focus on during the needle?
4. If possible – How will your child position themselves – e.g. on mum's lap?
5. Who will be there during the procedure – parents, toys?
6. Who would you like to talk during the needle e.g. mum, the nurse – or would you like everyone to be quiet?
7. Would they like a drink or something to eat when it is finished?

Tip: write out your action plan and give it to the person doing the procedure right beforehand so they can be on the same page

Plan a way to use your child's amazing imagination.

Two ways to use the imagination to manage medical procedures. You can use one, two or maybe you create your own? It's best to practice these before the procedure and ask your child which one works best. Make sure you use your child's imagination and their favourite activities, safe place or objects.

A. Lived In Imagination

- Ask your child where they would like to go in their imagination.
- This could be a game of netball, swimming in a pool, reading in their room, an adventure park
- Or you could go somewhere imaginary - riding a flying unicorn or a pterodactyl –a flying dinosaur, or you could go to somewhere in the future like their next birthday party or a holiday or to the beach.
- The important thing is that you use your child's imagination, activities that are special to them, activities that come with good emotions.
- When your child smiles as you talk about an activity – that is the one to use.
- Help them go there by using all their senses and feelings. What they see, hear, hold, smell and feel.

- Then when they are there - give them suggestions – eg “you are safe”.
- Suggest that they can just do what they are doing...
- Remind them they’re doing well... “you are doing really well – that’s great”
- Tell them it is nearly finished...
- Ask them to give a cough or wiggle their toes if anything bothers them.
- Tell them how well they did – even if they don’t manage this time...

B. Special Object and Special Powers

If your child has a teddy bear, doll or even a truck that is special to them, that toy can be a useful way to use their imagination. Before the procedure you can ask the toy to help your child practice your plan. You could ask your child to help you show the toy what to do with their imagination. Let your child find the answers for the toy. You can help and you can use the same suggestions as above.

Your child may be able to use their imagination to take on special powers to let them be strong, to let them float away, to be calm or just to be able to be in charge of their feelings.

By finding something that your child can associate with these powers lets them take the powers with them whilst having a procedure. You can combine these with any of the other techniques too.

As with all these techniques it works best if it comes from their imagination and their world.

So - if your child likes spider-man – ask them to put on an imaginary spider-man costume, and begin to notice all spider-man’s special powers.

Or ask them to wear an imaginary cape or a gown that allows them to be stronger and to lie still like a statue.

Or give them a magic imaginary bubble that they can climb inside whenever they need to be safe.

You get the picture.

When it’s finished

Tell your child how well they did and move onto something else.

Have a treat together if you like

This is not a ‘reward for being brave’ it’s simply a positive event to focus on instead of the needle

5. Useful Resources

Imagination

these are great audios that use similar techniques and are from a clinical psychologist – Jody Thomas working with Stanford Uni in California.

You can find several 7 minute audios that are very good via the link below

<http://imagination.stanford.edu/calm-during-procedures-and-pokes/>

SPANZA/EPIC resources

Society for Paediatric Anaesthesia New Zealand and Australia and
Effective Peri-procedural Communication

A range of resources for managing medical procedures.

<https://www.spanza.org.au/epic/resources-for-children-and-young-adults/>

<https://www.spanza.org.au/epic/resources-for-parents-carers-and-children/>