

Suburban Life

Lorraine McClellan editor/477-5450

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Kids may fear hospital stays

By Julie Brown
staff writer

A hospital can be a pretty frightening place, even for a grown-up. When children need to be admitted to the hospital, their fears may be even greater than those adult patients must cope with.

The fears that young children have when entering a hospital vary from child to child. Those fears also vary depending on the kind and/or amount of previous experience children and their families have with hospitals.

"It really depends on the age of the child," said Marcia Van Fossen, a registered nurse, unit coordinator for pediatrics at Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills.

"The older you go, the more sophisticated they are as far as their fears." Older children may worry about waking up in the middle of surgery — or perhaps about not waking up at all.

"Fear of the unknown is a major one, really, for the older ones," Van Fossen said.

CHILDREN MAY also worry about specific procedures to be done during their hospitalization.

"They're afraid of the shots," said Sally Beres, a staff nurse in pediatrics at Botsford. "They're always afraid of the shot they're going to get."

Separation anxiety is also common, "especially (for) the younger ones," Beres said. "They don't like Mom out of their sight."

Botsford's program for young patients is designed to help reduce the fear of the unknown many youngsters feel when entering the hospital.

The program is designed primarily for ambulatory surgery patients, such as those who come in to have their tonsils and adenoids removed.

"It's a program where, I would say generally, that these are healthy patients whose surgery would require an hour or less time," Van Fossen said. Such surgical procedures are increasingly being done on an outpatient basis, reflecting a nationwide trend.

Following surgery at Botsford, the young patients go into a recovery room. When they're ready, they go to the pediatric unit, remaining until it's time to go home.

The program is designed for children from infancy through early adolescence, and emphasizes pre-operative teaching. Two days before surgery, parents bring their children to the hospital for the necessary laboratory work.

"Then the parents and the child come up here to the pediatric unit," Van Fossen said. That portion of the program includes a tour and an explanation of the surgery.

"We explain step-by-step what's going to happen the day of surgery," Beres said.

SUCH EXPLANATIONS help reduce children's anxieties, she said, and also help create greater trust of hospital staff members.

"Children are asked individually to express their concerns and have them answered immediately," Van Fossen said. Having the opportunity to ask

questions also helps the parents of young patients, she said.

"Then they are calmer, which in turn helps the child."

Hospital staff members strive to involve parents in the child's care.

"We definitely involve parents," Van Fossen said. "I think that's one beauty of this. We count on the parents."

In addition to talking with hospital staff members, parents are given an instruction sheet, which includes telephone numbers to call if there's a problem.

"The parents are relieved, because they know they can call back," Van Fossen said. Parents are reminded that there's no such thing as a dumb question.

"It's only the one that remains inside their head."

BOTH WOMEN agree that parents can do things prior to a child's surgery that will help ease the youngster's fears.

"I think the best thing is not to threaten the child, or use it like it's something bad," Beres said. Children should not be lied to — for example, being told that a shot or some other procedure won't hurt a bit.

"We tell them in orientation that it is going to hurt, but the doctor will give them medicine for the pain," Beres said.

Some children may be reluctant to voice the fears they have about entering the hospital.

"Sometimes, with the younger kids, you have to ask them if they have any questions," Van Fossen said. Bringing a favorite toy or blanket to the hospital can also help a young patient feel more secure.

There are also books available that describe for youngsters what it's like to go into the hospital. At Botsford, the pediatrics staff uses a coloring book made available by the Kiwanis of Michigan Foundation, a non-profit corporation supported by the Kiwanis Clubs in the Michigan District of Kiwanis International.

The youngsters who go to Botsford for pre-operative teaching are also given surgical garb, to help familiarize them with the clothing worn during surgery.

"They take it home," Beres said. "A lot of them are in kindergarten, so that's a big show and tell item. They think it's terrific, they really like it."

PROGRAMS to help children get ready for hospital stays have become more common throughout the nation in recent years. Botsford's current program has been used since November 1983.

"We're recognizing that children have fears, and we're recognizing the parental component, how important that is," Van Fossen said. "So we're learning, too."

Some hospitals initially used programs for children that tried to teach too much, she said.

"A lot of research, evaluation of the programs, hadn't gone on. We have been able to get what the other hospitals used and modify it to prevent the pitfalls that might have occurred."



MARVIN TEEPLES/illustrator

Help, I need somebody

A hospital stay can be frightening for a child. Reassurance from parents, however, can help ease a child's fears when it's time to go to the hospital.



RANDY BOHST/Staff photographer

A variety of books are available to help describe to children what it's like to go into the hospital. This coloring book is used by Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills.

A Success Story?

One of the highest priorities held by parents is the eventual success of their children. For many parents, putting a child through college is a means to help assure this success. Helping a child choose the correct college or university is one more way to secure that son or daughter's success. But how can parents provide the proper guidance?



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7071 Orchard Lake Road, Suite 306 West Bloomfield, MI 48093

(313) 851-8535