



Helping your Child with Needle Phobia

1. Give some advance warning, but not too much

- Children should know what to expect when they go to the doctor. Blindsiding the child with a shot or blood draw can cause immense anxiety and lead to a distrust in parents and medical professionals as well as a fear of the doctor's office.
- Advance warning of any intervention involving needles should be given no more than 1 week ahead of time. For little ones (5 and under) 1-2 days before is sufficient. Children need the opportunity to process the information, but shouldn't have an extended period of time to worry about it.

2. Help your child get used to the idea and know what to expect

- Younger children can practice "playing doctor" on their stuffed animals. Using a doctor kit can help them understand the instruments used in an appointment.
- Children can also have the opportunity to inspect items used during their visit such as gloves, prep pads, Band-Aids, etc. Often times, children are most triggered by seeing the tray containing these items. Giving them an opportunity beforehand to see that they are not scary can be helpful.
- Books! Have your child read a book about what to expect at their appointment. Try "Lions Aren't Afraid of Shots" by Howard Bennett

3. Make a plan for what your child will be doing during the visit

- Let your child's doctor know ahead of time that your child has a fear of needles and/or has a difficult time when getting shots or blood draws.
- Try to schedule all appointments that involve needles so that medical staff can adequately prepare and support your child. Try to avoid walk in clinics for these types of appointments (like flu shots) when possible.
- Ask for support services, if needed (social workers, child life specialists).
- Have your child be part of the process. Let them handle gloves and Band-Aids, and give them an opportunity to say when they are ready. Do not "sneak" a shot in when they are not prepared.
- Try to avoid restraining the child if at all possible- this only adds to your child's fear of needles and can create a traumatic experience that he or she will associate with the doctor's office.

4. Make a plan for what you will do

- Parents should remain calm, cool, and collected as much as possible.
- Assure your child 1 time, and remind them of the plan they have in place and their coping skills (deep breathing, distraction, using “buzzy”, etc.)
- Remember that over-comforting your child can backfire. If you are repeating over and over how “everything is okay” and assuring them that it won’t hurt, children’s anxiety can often rise because of how much attention is being given to the procedure.
- Reward your child’s bravery! Make a plan ahead of time on how you will celebrate your child getting through their appointment safely and as calmly as possible- let your child know that they can expect to get rewarded!

Coping Strategies

Deep Breathing:

- Help your child practice deep breathing beforehand. I often teach “bubble breathing” to young children
- Bubble Breathing: Explain to your younger child that they should pretend that they are blowing bubbles through a tiny wand. In order to get the “best bubbles possible” they need to take a deep belly breath and blow out “super slow and steady”. You can practice with actual bubbles to reinforce this concept.

Distraction:

- Have your child bring their favorite toy, blankie, stuffie, etc.
- You can also offer them preferred media (shows, clips, books, and music) to use as distraction during the procedure. Decide on this together with your child.
- Make up a silly word or phrase for them to repeat with you and the doctor or nurse
- 5 senses- have your child say their five senses out loud with you- for example: “I see the basketball on the wall, I hear the music, I feel my blanket, etc.)

Buzzy:

- Our office has Buzzy! Buzzy is a vibrating bee that can be used with an ice pack to help numb and distract your child from the shot. Ask our nurses about it beforehand

Weighted Modalities:

- Some children respond very well to weighted modalities such as a blanket or lap animal.
- Weighted modalities offer your child deep pressure that they can control. This is often most helpful for children you don’t want to be touched or held when getting a shot or blood draw. It can help them calm their muscles, and serve as a distraction. Ask your nurse or social worker about using a weighted modality during your child’s appointment.