



# HELPING YOUR CHILD OVERCOME FEAR OF NEEDLES

Prepared by Dr. Kate Aubrey, Clinical Psychologist



Although getting needles protects kids against various illnesses, they sure do hurt! It's no wonder most children are scared of getting shots. Did you know Canadian children receive around 20 routine vaccinations before the age of five, not including annual flu shots? Here are some tips to help make the next doctor's visit a little smoother experience.

**INFANTS.** Stay calm and cuddle your baby in an upright position. Physical contact is key. Research has shown that breastfeeding before, during, and after a needle helps reduce pain. Or you can give infants some sugar water. To make your own sugar water, boil water for two minutes, then mix 10 mL of the water with 1 teaspoon of sugar. Let cool before offering to your baby. Topical anesthetic creams can also be applied before the injection. Ask the pharmacist to help you select a product, and talk to your doctor about where to apply the cream.

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**TODDLERS.** Prepare your toddler by talking about getting a needle ahead of time. For some kids, that will mean minutes ahead of an appointment, but if your child tends to like lots of notice for new experiences, you can start discussing the vaccination a few days before. During the needle, encourage deep breathing by blowing on a pinwheel or blowing bubbles. You can also distract them by counting, playing a game, or singing.

**SCHOOL AGE KIDS.** Deep breathing and distraction are the main tools for coping with needle pain. Do a deep breathing exercise by having your child imagine that their lungs are balloons. Distract them with jokes, music, the iPad. Explain beforehand that needles are necessary, and assure them that the pain is temporary. You can apply topical anesthetics before the appointment. Offer an incentive (a treat), like candy or a book, afterward. When using rewards, make sure you present it as a reward for working hard to cope and for a job well done, instead of a bribe. For example, say, "We can get an ice cream when your needle is done," as opposed to "You can have a treat if you get this needle."

### TIPS TO REMEMBER...

**Do** hold your kids, particularly if they're under three, rather than have them lie flat. For older kids, have them sit in a chair or on the exam table. You can help hold your older child's arm steady, but don't forcibly restrain your child as this will increase fear and pain.

**Don't** reassure your child. Don't say "It's okay, it will be over soon". Research has shown that using this type of reassuring language actually makes the pain feel worse! When you tell a child everything is okay, she actually assumes you're worried about what's going to happen. Instead, use neutral language and focus on topics not related to needles.

**Do** use distraction tools, such as tablets, phones and books, or have your child look out a window or count dots on the floor. Research has shown that distraction is the best way to help your child get through medical procedures, including needles.

**Do** use skin-numbing products. EMLA cream, a topical anesthetic, may reduce immunization pain in children. The cream blocks nerves from transmitting painful impulses to the brain. You should purchase cream so that you can apply an hour before the vaccination.

**Do** give your child something to look forward to, such as a treat. With any negative experience, giving your child something positive to look forward to can change the event.

**Don't** give your child an oral pain reliever, such as Tylenol or Advil, before the shot. A lot of parents think that giving oral pain medications will help, but they don't reduce the pain and research suggests they may interfere with the effectiveness of the vaccine. You can give pain medication after the shot, though.

**Don't** avoid talking to your child about the needle, and don't sugar-coat it.