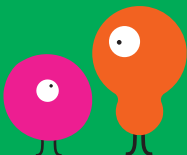




USING PLAY TO SUPPORT CHILDREN DURING VACCINATIONS



GUIDANCE FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS



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Starlight's mission is to put play at the heart of every child's healthcare. Play protects children's mental health. It prepares them for their medical procedures and can reduce the pain and trauma of their treatment.

For children, the only things more important than play are the need to be loved, cared for and nourished. At Starlight, we are passionate about protecting this time of play. We champion its importance. We defend every child's right to play.

We provide resources that offer the opportunities for children to do what comes naturally and play, even in a healthcare setting.

This booklet provides you with some useful tools for engaging with children and providing reassurance for them and their parents during their vaccinations. Starlight's Head of Play, Laura, has put together some information to help you set the scene, build rapport and use play to support distraction. Hopefully, these tips will help children's vaccinations to be more relaxed and to reduce the time taken by family appointments in your clinic.

When we see signs of anxiety, children's worries can be spiralling. If we manage to interrupt those spiralling worries by engaging in a friendly and reassuring way, it gives the possibility to change the outcome for the better.

SETTING THE SCENE



New environments and experiences can be overwhelming for children. Anxiety can be triggered by an appointment for a vaccination because it includes:

- 1 Unfamiliar surroundings and people
- 2 Unknown clinical procedures
- 3 The potential for pain

A child-friendly environment is important for the security and wellbeing of the children.

Providing a welcoming, inviting entrance and waiting space can help children, and their accompanying adult, to relax.

The key to building a strong platform for successful, stress free vaccinations is making sure a child feels seen and acknowledged.

PUTTING CHILDREN AT EASE

To make children feel more comfortable and to put them at ease during an appointment, it helps to make them feel included in the process. It's easy to assume that it's better to hide difficult things from children but a little information can be a great help and comfort for them. We've got more information later about keeping children in control.

Do be aware of non-verbal signs of anxiety. These could be being very quiet, talking loudly, looking at the exit or struggling to engage.

You can encourage them to relax by using a positive and calming manner.

BUILDING RAPPORT



Consider getting to eye level with the child, so you're not looming over.

Building rapport with a child and their accompanying adult help to reassure and relax. A good way of doing this is to be interested in them. Try finding out more about them by asking:

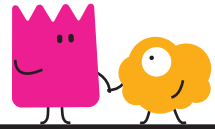
- What's your favourite animal or TV character?
- How do you like to play at home? This can help you throughout the appointment if you can improvise on a theme.
- Do they like football/music/gaming? Only use these if you have a follow up.
- Ask children about their day; what did they have for breakfast? What are they doing for the rest of the day?

Keep their accompanying adult engaged in the process. Ask if they have spoken to their child about the process, so you have an idea of the child's level of understanding of what is happening.

NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

- Consider your body language; be relaxed, open, show empathy and acceptance.
- Your manner is very important. Be sensitive and patient.
- Manage your distance. Respect a child's personal space whenever possible. Keep your distance while they remain close to their trusted adult so that children do not feel 'crowded'. This helps a child's psychological safety.

KEEPING CHILDREN INFORMED AND IN CONTROL



Children can be given choices over elements of the procedure and how it's carried out. This can help give a sense of control and reduce anxiety.

- Give them the option to either look or look away during the procedure.
- Let them choose their distraction: counting games, visualisation, games or books.
- Be honest. Avoid language like, 'It's nothing, it's not going to hurt.' Instead use language like, 'It may feel like a scratch, but it will be over very quickly'.

AGE & STAGE

The age and stage of a child's development don't always match if the child has a learning disability or autism. It would help to know in advance and adapt to their needs but don't be afraid to ask their adult if they need any adaptations. Use our guide below to adapt the environment and your approach for different children.

Based on child development theories breakdown of age/ stage range of understanding

5-6

Create a nice environment, have something fun to do. Some information about what is coming, without too much detail and not too far in advance.



Having a sense of control reduces feelings of helplessness and uncertainty.

6-9

Create a nice environment, have something fun to do. Talk a couple of days in advance, normalising, addressing any worries. Practice breathing techniques in advance.

7-9

Create a nice environment, have something fun to do. More forward planning may be possible, explain how vaccines work, choose their own distraction technique, look out for signs of anxiety. Practice breathing techniques in advance.

10-11

Create a nice environment, have something fun to do. More forward planning may be possible, explain how vaccines work, choose their own distraction technique, look for signs of anxiety. Practice breathing techniques in advance.



DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

Hot chocolate breathing:

- 1 Hold out your hands like you have a mug of hot chocolate
- 2 Breathe in slowly through your nose like you're smelling the chocolate
- 3 Breathe out slowly





Blow an imaginary feather up in the air – aiming to keep it there.



Box breathing:

Step 1: Breathe in counting to four slowly. Feel the air enter your lungs.

Step 2: Hold your breath for four seconds. Try to avoid inhaling or exhaling for four seconds.

Step 3: Slowly exhale through your mouth for four seconds.

Step 4: Repeat steps 1 to 3 until you feel re-centred.

Guided imagery

Help them to imagine a favourite place, encourage them to name things they can see in their mind's eye. Help the imagery along with responsive prompts, giving them the experience of being in a 'happy place'. Guided imagery is an excellent tool for cooperative distraction.

Interaction games

Counting games. Count to 100 in multiples of 5, 10 & 20.

Number of things: 5 fruits, 5 games, 10 animals...

Utilise resources

Toys, books and games that are familiar to children can provide comfort and support.

TELL US

WHAT YOU THINK

Your feedback is important to the development and improvement of Starlight resources. The more we know about your experience – both what worked and the areas we can improve – the better the impact we can have together.

Please email your thoughts to
healthplay.services@starlight.org.uk



**Find out more about Starlight
and the resources we provide for
health professionals like you.**

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TRANSFORMING CHILDREN'S HEALTH THROUGH PLAY

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