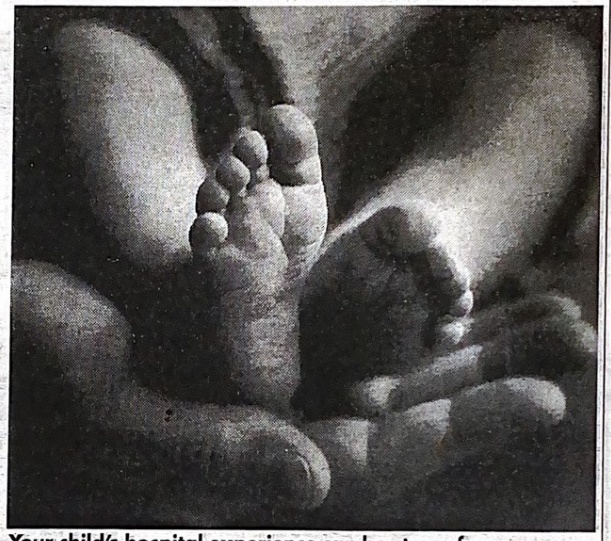
Comfort zone

Preparing your child for surgery

BY CHRISTINE JUNGE



Your child's hospital experience can be stress-free.

The scene appears more like an episode of Romper Room than the standard pre-operative procedure at Newton-Wellesley Hospital: After watching some magic tricks and picking out a toy or two to take home, the child climbs into a little red wagon and gets pulled down the hall, a train noise playing in the background the whole time. But that's what today's world of child medicine is all about: making the parents and child feel as comfortable as possible.

There are, after all, few things parents dread more than sitting in a hospital with their child. However, what was once a scary, nerve-wracking experience for parent and child alike has become a fun and almost stress-free time in some hospitals.

Dr. Susan Lisman, the director of pediatric anesthesia at Newton-Wellesley Hospital, said that the method for preparing children for surgery has advanced in the past few years. One of the main improvements, at her hospital at least, is how the surgical teams now involve parents before and after the surgery. "Almost all parents come into the room for when the kids go to sleep.... One of the parents usually has the child on their lap when he gets anesthetized. And we use a flavored mask [to dispense the anesthesia]. Then the parent lifts the child onto the table, kissing them goodbye. After the operation, usually within minutes of the child getting to the recovery room, the parent joins him. That's less traumatic for everybody," she said.

Though she noted that studies have shown little difference in the recovery rates of children whose parents played such a role, she said it definitely helps the child and the parents relax while they're there.

"The hardest part for the parent is to turn over their child to someone they don't know, who they have no reason to have confidence in. What we try to do is develop a rapport with the parent and child. And it's not an act, we just love doing this. We spend 10 to15 minutes with each patient, and by the time we're done, we know them and care about the child," Lisman said.

Steve Cohen is a main part of the festivities that welcome the child to Newton-Wellesley. As a nurse anesthetist who has attended to pre-operative children for 19 years, he has developed a whole bag of tricks to

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help put everyone at ease.

Though the games and toys he engages the children with are what they usually remember most, some of the subtler things he does are the most effective. "I'll develop a rapport with the child and family simply by saying, 'Slap me five.' I keep a squeaker in my pocket, and if I've broken the ice, I'll say, 'Let me check out your nose.' I'll touch it and it will squeak, and everyone starts laughing. I inch my way in and get sense of what each child is like," he said.

And though the attention is focused on the child, it's usually the parents who are most affected by these antics. Carrie Houle, whose two-and-a-half-year-old daughter Shelby recently went to Newton-Wellesley for eye surgery, couldn't say enough about Cohen and the whole surgical team. She was comforted that all six of them came out to introduce themselves to her and her husband, and she was just amazed at how far Cohen went to put Shelby at ease, she said.

She mentioned the songs he sang and the tricks he did, but what seemed to impress her most were the little things, like when he went out of his way to find Shelby hospital pajamas in her favorite color, yellow. And that he always got down to her eye level when speaking to her. And that he never hesitated to comfort Houle and her husband with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Our gratitude to him, it's so hard to explain. I was so apprehensive because of the bad memories I had of a childhood surgery. She won't have any of that. She'll think of it as a great play date," she said.

Shelby and her mom even made him a special thank-you present: hand-painted mugs and a t-shirt covered in the little one's handprints. Cohen said that was the best thank-you he ever received, and noted another gratifying event. "I was running in a race in a nearby town, and two parents came up to me and touched my nose. They said, 'My daughter remembers you, the squeak.' I guess it impresses some people, and that's a happy situation," he said.

Newton-Wellesley is also developing a new pre-operative program that will allow children to visit the hospital prior to their surgery so they can get accustomed to it.

And this hospital is not alone. Many in the area have some kind of program to help make even the tiniest patients comfortable. Children's Hospital in Boston obviously has a lot of experience in this area. According to its Web site, it has everything from musical performances to storytelling to its very own "Clown Care Unit."

Massachusetts General Hospital has a pre-admission program already in place, where kids are taught about the particulars of their surgeries in age-specific ways. Marilyn Gifford, a child life specialist there, said the goal is to orient the child and parents and allay any fears or misconceptions they have. On a day other than that of the surgery, the staff answers questions, gives a tour of different areas of the hospital, puts on an educational puppet show for the younger set and shows a video for the older ones.

"We teach them about anesthesia, when and how they will be separated from their parents, what doctors and nurses look like. And we tell them fun things, like that you can tell a doctor is smiling under his mask because you can see crinkles around his eyes," she added.

A lot of psychological and developmental issues are also considered. "Different age groups have different fears and concerns about surgery. Preschoolers usually think about things in terms of smell, taste, sound, touch. Children at this age might also think they're going in to the hospital because they did something wrong. They think of it as a punishment. So we try to explain that there are many reasons people go into the hospital — maybe something needs to be fixed, or they need to have tests done," she explained.

Although all hospitals might not have such a well-developed program, most have someone who's there to assist children before surgery. Gifford said that all hospitals with over 20 beds have at least one child life specialist. Though preparing children for surgery is very different than preparing adults, one thing is the same: the more familiar they are with their surroundings and what's going to happen to them, the less anxious they are.