

HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH PAIN



Pain is something that will be experienced by every person in his or her lifetime. Some pain will be severe, and some will be minor. Some will have a long duration, and some will have a relatively short duration. Dealing with pain is not a skill that children are born with. Parents must help their children develop effective skills for coping with the pain that is inevitable in every person's life. The information below will help parents learn more about pain and help them help their children cope with it when it does occur.

Things that Affect Children's Experiences with Pain

***The situation.** The pain a child experiences is often affected by the child's specific situation. The age of the child, his or her expectations

about pain, his or her available coping methods, the support received from family, and the duration of the pain are all examples of a child's specific situation.

***The emotions involved.** The emotions a child is experiencing when confronted with pain has a lot to do with the severity of the pain. For example, a child who is highly upset is likely to experience more pain than a child who is calm and relaxed.

***The child's cognitive level.** What the child understands about the pain, for example, whether or not he knows why he is experiencing the pain and how long it will last, will affect the overall experience with pain.

***The child's previous experience with pain.** What the child knows about pain as a result of prior learning will affect the pain experience.

***How others (parents) respond to the child's pain.** How parents and other family members treat the child who is in pain will affect the child's experience with pain. For example, parents who respond in an emotional and/or hysterical way will probably upset their child and thus make his or her pain experience worse.

***How parents respond to their own pain.** Children learn by watching their parents. Therefore, the way children cope with their own pain will probably be very similar to how they have seen their parents cope with pain in the past. Parents who treat their own pain in a matter-of-fact manner will probably have children who do the same.

Things that Increase Children's Pain

***Feelings of having little or no control over the pain.** Children who have not been taught adequate ways to cope with pain will probably feel that they have little or not control over their pain experience.

***Not having complete and/or accurate information about the pain.** Children who don't understand the pain they are experiencing may feel helpless and anxious. These feelings will most likely increase their experience with pain.

***Having a negative attitude about the pain.** Children who resist their pain and feel that they have no control over it will probably experience more pain than children who accept their pain and attempt to find ways to cope with it.

***Not knowing how to cope with the pain.** Children who have not been taught effective coping skills are likely to experience more pain than children who have been taught how to deal with the pain.

***Excessive attention to child's pain complaints by family members.** Parents who pamper their children when they are in pain are actually reinforcing their child's pain complaints. Children who are allowed to complain excessively about their pain have little time to focus on other activities that might take their mind off their pain.

***Overprotection by family members.** Children in pain who are shielded from the outside world by family members are likely to experience more pain than children who are encouraged to function as normally as possible.

Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is pain that continues for an unspecified and unknown period of time. Chronic pain can be the result of a serious injury or by a disease. People who suffer from chronic pain are not able to wait until their pain goes away - there is usually no end in sight. In these instances, people in chronic pain must learn to live with and adapt to the pain.

Non-Medical Ways to Help Children Cope with Chronic Pain

Consult with your child's health care provider for assistance with behavioral and cognitive methods of coping with chronic pain.

***Behavioral Methods.** Behavioral approaches to pain management often involve teaching children appropriate ways to respond to their pain, teaching parents and other family members how to appropriately respond to their children's pain, or both. Behavioral methods include attempting to eliminate behaviors that may increase pain, and teaching behaviors that will help minimize pain. For example, children who are rewarded by their parents when they complain of pain through special treatment, gifts, treats, etc. are likely to continue complaining. A behavioral intervention in this case would include teaching parents to respond to their children's pain in a matter-of-fact way without providing any rewards. Other examples of behavioral methods include exercise, relaxation training, and modeling.

***Cognitive Methods.** Cognitive approaches to pain management involve working with children's thoughts and beliefs about their pain. Some examples include thought-

stopping, visual imagery, distraction and attention and hypnosis. Cognitive methods are most effective with children who are old enough to communicate verbally with others.

What Parents can do to Help Children Deal with Chronic Pain

The general recommendations below apply to many children with chronic pain problems. However, it is important to discuss the appropriateness of these strategies for your child with your child's health care provider.

***Attendance is important.** It is very important that your child attend school on a daily basis if recommended by your child's health care provider. The position that you need to communicate to your child is that daily school attendance is expected. If your child complains about pain before school starts, treat these complaints in a matter-of-fact manner. If possible, arrangements should be made with school officials not to send the child home if he complains of pain. If possible, the child should rest quietly for a short period of time at school if the pain becomes intense. Following this rest time, he should return to the classroom. Any missed work from these rest periods (for example tests or assignments) should

be made up following return to the class. Of course, if your child is showing signs and symptoms of an illness (for example, fever, runny nose, diarrhea), your child may need to stay at home. You should discuss with your child's pediatrician what symptoms should result in staying home, and what symptoms would require further medical attention.

***Restrict activities.** If your child stays home from school because of the pain, his activities should be restricted. He should be confined to the bedroom. The child should only be allowed to work on schoolwork during these days. No television, radio, computer games, comic books, or toys should be allowed. If the child's pain improves during the course of the day, he should be taken to school.

***Use positive reinforcement.** Reward and praise your child for periods of time when he keeps a normal routine and no pain is reported. One strategy is to make up a daily reward "menu." This menu should consist of several special privileges that your child could receive if she has not complained of pain that day. These privileges should be provided to the child during the evening hours. Examples of such privileges would include staying up later than normal, making a favorite snack before bedtime, or playing a

special game with a parent. In addition to providing these privileges for pain-free days, you should praise your child and let her know how pleased you are that she is coping more effectively with the pain.

***Use minimal attention.** Minimize the attention paid to your child's pain behavior. Discussions regarding the pain should be limited and matter-of-fact. The goal is to try to get your child to focus on things other than his pain (for example, homework, hobbies, chores, games).

***Make associations.** You and your child should attempt to identify events at home or at school that are associated with increased pain. You may wish to use a chart or diary to keep track of your child's activities immediately prior to the onset of the pain. This information should be shared with child's doctor.

***Limit discussions about pains and illnesses.** All family member should limit discussions about any pains or illnesses they might have.

***Follow medical recommendations.** It is very important that all medical recommendations are followed. If your child is taking medication it must be given as prescribed.

***Practice relaxation exercises.** If

relaxation exercises have been recommended, it is important that your child practice these exercises on a daily basis. These exercises will only be effective if practiced on a frequent, consistent basis.

***Keep communication open.** While the goal is to get your child to minimize the complaints of "regular" chronic pain, it is important that your child knows that he should inform you of any significant changes in pain. Such changes should be reported to your child's health care provider.

Acute Pain

Acute pain is generally described as pain that is relatively brief in nature. It can be brought about by an injury, a minor illness, or a medical intervention. Acute pain generally does not cause as much trouble for children as does chronic pain because its duration is often predictable, and the amount of pain experienced is often not severe. Nonetheless, acute pain can be upsetting to children. Here are some ways to help children cope with acute pain.

Cope with Acute Pain

***Provide reassurance.** Parents can help their children deal with acute pain by providing reassurance. Parents can tell their children that the pain won't last long (if this is true), that the injury will heal, and that the pain will gradually go away. Parents should stay with their children to provide comfort and support.

***Involve child in other activities (distraction).** Parents should make attempts to involve their children in activities that will divert attention from the pain. The less attention given to the pain, the less painful the experience will be.

***Prepare children for painful medical interventions.** If acute pain is caused by a planned medical procedure, for example, a shot, parents should take steps to prepare their children for this event before it occurs. Parents should describe the medical treatment, the reason for the treatment, where it will take place, the equipment that will be used, and the medical personnel who will be there.

Non-Medical Ways to Help Children

***Help your child relax.** Parents

should help their children relax by talking to them in a calm voice, allaying their fears, and perhaps offering a back rub or a massage or other soothing activity.



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