

Alleviating Anxiety in a Pediatric Setting  
or  
The Bunny

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Even as adults, a trip to the doctor's office can be anxiety provoking: the cold feeling of the exam table, the vulnerability of wearing a "johnny". For children, this anxiety can be greatly increased by a variety of factors such as: past experiences, lack of control, fear of the unknown, and developmental level. Younger children are especially vulnerable: their cognitive abilities and coping mechanisms are limited. In our busy outpatient orthopaedic department, we are frequently called upon to remove pins, staples, and sutures in our pediatric population. Usually there is not time for lengthy preparation, and our nursing staff quickly assesses each patient and utilizes appropriate and simple coping exercises like deep breathing and distraction. Recently, however, we had the time and opportunity to plan a developmentally appropriate and family-centered intervention in advance.

Alyssa is a beautiful and independent six year-old girl with cerebral palsy. She had a tibial osteotomy, (a procedure to improve leg positioning for walking), with subsequent hardware removal and postoperative healing issues. Her frequent visits to our clinic helped us build a trusting relationship with her. One day she presented for a drain removal with staples to come out one week later. When Alyssa saw the staples, her anxiety was quite apparent as she burst into tears and begged us not to take the staples out. This was very unusual for Alyssa who had frequent dressing changes without ever crying or complaining.

We felt Alyssa's anxiety may have stemmed from fear of the unknown. She had never had staples removed before. We wanted Alyssa to experience the concrete act of practicing the procedure to increase her understanding, control, and confidence, and lessen her anxiety. We had previously noticed that she delighted in any participation we could allow her. We found a cuddly stuffed bunny and wrapped a piece of paper with staples on it around the bunny's leg. We practiced taking the staples out of the bunny beforehand to make sure the staples would come out easily and that Alyssa would be able to take them out herself. Alyssa's mother, who knows her best, also thought this intervention might work.

The day of her staple removal, her mother had given her medication prior to coming in, though she never felt this was effective. Alyssa unwrapped the bunny's dressing and

then avidly tackled the staples. We had to help her with the first few but then she was able to remove the rest successfully. When it came time to remove her staples, her anxiety level was noticeably lessened. She bravely held her mother's hand, and we talked to her and counted with her. The procedure went quickly and Alyssa sailed through it as we had hoped. We all applauded her and there were many high-five's. She was so proud of herself and we of her. Shortly thereafter, she said, "Carol, that didn't even hurt!" We nearly cried. Our plan had worked. She had control and was successful. We feel that this nursing technique was effective in alleviating her stress.

Alyssa's own personality and resilience, the trusting relationship she had with her nurses, her mother and sister's presence and support during the procedure, the increased knowledge and control she had during the procedure, and the advanced notice we had to prepare thoroughly for this experience all played a part in empowering Alyssa to cope well during this procedure. Alyssa was able to find pride, happiness, and accomplishment in what might have otherwise been a traumatic event. Alyssa left clinic happily that day with her new bunny!

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