

THE SICK CHILD

A Child's Reaction To Hospital

Illness threatens both the physical and psychological development of children. Sickness causes pain, restraint of movement, long sleepless periods, restriction of feeds, separation from parents and home environment which may result emotional trauma. Hospitalization and prolonged illness can retard growth and development. Can cause adverse reactions in the child, based on stage of development.

* Reactions of Neonates

Hospitalization and prolonged illness in neonatal period interrupt in the early stages of development of a healthy mother-child relationship and family integration. Impairment of bonding and trusting relationship, inability of the parents to love and care for the baby and inability of the baby to respond to parents and family members are common reactions of the neonates.

* Reactions of infants

Infants reactions are mainly separation

anxiety and disturbance of development of basic trust, when the infant is separated from mother. Emotional withdrawal and the depression are found in the infants of 4-8 months of age. Interference of growth and delayed developments also found. Older infants (8-12 months of age) may have limited tolerance due to separation anxiety which is found as fear of strangers, excessive crying, clinging and overdependence on mother.

* Reaction of Toddlers

Toddlers reactions due to hospitalization are found as protest, despair, denial and regression.

The toddler protests by frequent crying, shaking crib, rejecting nurses attention, urgent desire to find mother and showing signs of distrust with anger and tears, especially when with mothers.

In despair, the toddler becomes hopeless, apathetic, anorectic, listless, looks sad, cry continuously or intermittently and use comfort measures like thumb sucking, fingering lip, & tightly clutching a toy. In denial, the child reacts by accepting.

Care without protest, and represses all feelings. The child does not cry in the absence of mother and may seem more attached to nurses.

The toddlers may react by regression in an attempt to regain control of a stressful situation. They are found to stop using newly acquired skills & may return to the behavior of an infant during illness and hospitalization.

* Reactions of Preschool Child

The preschool children adopt various mental mechanisms (defense mechanisms) to adjust with the stressful experiences of hospitalization and prolonged illness. They react by exhibiting regression, repression, projection, displacement, identification, aggression, denial, withdrawal, and fantasy. The preschooler may simply show similar behaviors of the toddlers, i.e., protest, despair and denial.

* Reactions of School-aged Children

During hospitalization and prolonged illness, the school-aged children are concerned with fear, worry, mutilation, fantasies, modesty & privacy. They react with defense mechanisms like regression, separation anxiety,

negativism, depression, phobia, unrealistic fear, suppression or denial of symptoms and conscious attempts of mature behavior.

* Reactions of Adolescents

Adolescents are concerned with lack of privacy, separation from peers or family and school, interference with body image or independence or self concept and sexuality. They may show anger and demanding or uncooperative behavior or increased dependency on parents and staff. They may adopt mental mechanism like intellectualization about disease, rejection of treatment, depression, denial or withdrawal.