

# *My child's behaviour* **HAS CHANGED**



Coming into hospital can mean many changes to your family's everyday routine. Some children will really enjoy their time in hospital – getting to know everyone, and having time to go to the play centre. However, some may find the disruption to their routine difficult to manage. This may be expressed through changes in their behaviour. Understanding these changes, and how to manage them if they happen, can help you feel more prepared in finding ways to support your child while they adjust.



This toolkit is designed to help you think about some possible reasons for your child's change in behaviour and some strategies to help address these changes.

# THINGS TO REMEMBER

If your child is feeling unwell, you might notice that their behaviour changes or that they are showing different emotions to normal. This might be your child's way of telling you that they have questions or that they are feeling worried or upset about their illness or treatment. It can be hard for children to find the words or the right way to help you understand what they are feeling and they might need your help.

Here are some common reasons for changes in children's behaviour:

- separation from family, friends and school
- disruption and changes to routine due to illness
- needing to be comforted more when ill
- becoming frustrated and bored due to restricted activity
- feeling upset or anxious about hospital and treatment
- becoming tired from treatment
- possible side effects of medication



# Top tips and strategies

## Talk

Give your child the opportunity and space to talk about their difficulties. This will help them feel heard and understood. If they find it too hard to articulate what they are feeling sometimes drawing or playing with games and toys can help them express what is happening to them. Have a look at the coping with worries toolkits and use some strategies outlined there to facilitate talking about feelings.

## Coping mechanisms

Help your child find different ways of coping with their difficulties by creating a list of coping strategies. You can put together a list of coping strategies with your child. They can pick the ones that help or try out different options and rate them out of 10. Here are some suggestions:

Things that help me are:	Score/10
Listening to music	/10
Talking to a friend	/10
Talking to mum/dad/carer	/10
Being on my own	/10
Going for a walk/relaxation	/10
Watching TV	/10



If your child is feeling anxious or worried, then relaxation techniques, which focus on thoughts, emotions, physical feelings and behaviours can help to reduce anxiety. Don't worry if they don't work the first time, relaxation techniques need lots of practice for them to work well.

- visualise a place where you feel most relaxed, imagine all of the details, what you can see, hear, feel and smell
- controlled breathing exercises
- distraction from the negative thought can help create less space for stress or worry
- positive self-talk, such as writing down strengths and how these help you cope with negative emotions, e.g. 'I stayed calm before, I can stay calm again'

## Keep busy

All children may get a bit bored, and planning activities or trips out of hospital can help. Try to help your child keep busy with different activities. Relaxing activities can include reading a book, listening to music, being creative by drawing or making things. Encourage your child to get engrossed in something they enjoy, such as a new board game. Speak to the play specialist for ideas of some fun activities to do whilst in hospital. It is also important to make sure there aren't too many things going on at once for your child, since this could be overwhelming and tiring.

## **Prevent triggers**

Plan ahead and come up with solutions together to help prevent potentially distressing situations, e.g. stop watching scary TV shows if they make your child more anxious.

## **Preparing for anxiety provoking-situations**

Try to help your child realise when they start to feel anxious or scared/worried, so that they can implement relaxation techniques before the feelings become too strong. You can talk to your child, before the situation, about strategies they can use, e.g. if your child is scared of/worried about crowds, reassure your child that they will be OK and that they can hold your hand if they are scared.

## **Keep boundaries**

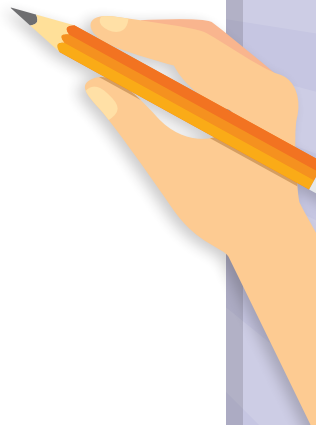
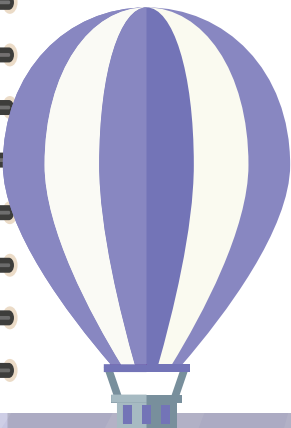
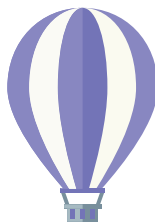
If possible, keep to routines and try to ensure normal activities can continue. It's also important to keep normal limits and boundaries. Your child still needs to know what is and what isn't acceptable behaviour. Just because your child is ill do not excuse behaviour that would have previously not been allowed.

## Prevent triggers

If your child asks questions about hospital, the future, their illness, then be truthful in your answers. It's important that you fill the gaps honestly as opposed to letting their active imaginations take over. Make sure you use age appropriate language so that they understand.

## Keep boundaries

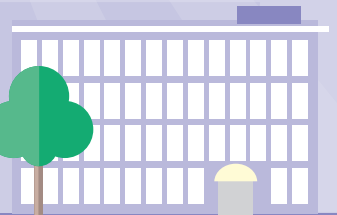
Keep friends, family and school in the loop. Let them know that your child isn't feeling themselves so that they can be aware and sensitive of this.



# WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

## Working with your medical team

- 1 Speak to your healthcare team if you feel concerned about your child's feelings or behaviour. They may be able to direct you to services where you can access guidance and support.
- 2 Some teams in the hospital have a psychologist and/or counsellor as a member of their team, who can speak to patients and their families if they have any questions about changes in behaviour or mood. Ask a member of your healthcare team who knows you well, such as your clinical nurse specialist, if they can make a referral on your behalf.



# WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

## Useful resources

### Books

What to do when you worry too much by Dawn Huebner

Starving the anxiety gremlin by Kate Collins-Donnelly

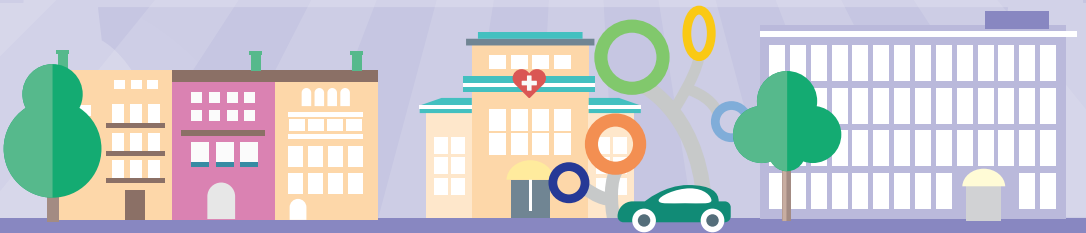
Banish your self-esteem thief by Kate Collins Donnelly

The Incredible Years: A Troubleshooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 2-8

<http://www.incredibleyears.com/parents-teachers/for-parents/>

### Website

[https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/anxiety/?gclid=CMT8lb3R4tQCFei\\_7Qod6tUGWQ](https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/anxiety/?gclid=CMT8lb3R4tQCFei_7Qod6tUGWQ)





These toolkits have been written by NHS clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists working for University Hospitals Bristol. They have been co-designed with service users and healthcare staff. These toolkits are only intended to provide general advice and information. Please discuss your individual needs with your doctor or specialist nurse. If you would like more information about psychology services please go to:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/>

We would like to thank patients and other healthcare staff for their contributions to this toolkit.

For access to other patient toolkits please go to the following address:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/resources/>

For this leaflet in large print, audio or PDF format, please email [patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk](mailto:patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk)

© University Hospitals Bristol  
| Published: 05/10/18 | Expires: 31/10/21 DOTS/TS/PHS/TLKTP/CHANGE/OCT18 |

