

How to Make Shots Less Stressful

Vaccines represent significant breakthroughs in medical research and disease prevention. When the Centers for Disease Control's recommended immunization schedule is followed according to plan, it is shown to be the most effective and safest way to protect your child from potentially fatal diseases. However, the process of going to the pediatrician and receiving shots can be stressful, or even anxiety-producing, for young children.

A patient's relationship with their pediatrician is important, and once you have found the right primary care doctor for your family, it can set the stage for their feelings toward medical professionals or clinical settings later in life. Studies show that preparing your children for vaccinations should ideally include three components: explaining what will happen, how it will feel, and strategies for coping with any related stress or discomfort. Follow these simple steps on how to make shots less stressful.

- **Be honest.** Tell children their vaccines may be uncomfortable or bothersome for a second or two, and have them practice slowly counting to two seconds so they get a sense of how long that really is. Tell them what to expect at their appointment, and explain why the procedure is necessary and how it will help them.



- **Use Neutral Language.** Request that the health care providers let your child know what will happen and when, using neutral language such as “we’re ready to start,” advises Dr. Marni Nagel, a pediatric psychologist.
- **Encourage them to ask questions.** Remind them that they can ask any questions they want to of their doctor or nurse.
- **Time the appointment well.** For babies and toddlers, scheduling the appointment around their bottle/feeding time may help. Receiving a bottle or feeding right after the shot may help soothe your baby.

- For infants, engaging in at least 4 of the 5 S's has been shown to reduce distress after immunizations, says Nagel. These include swaddling, placing on the side/stomach while holding, making shushing sounds, rocking, and sucking. Sucking can be done by through breastfeeding, a bottle, or pacifier. For infants, dipping their pacifier in sugar water has been shown to decrease stress associated with immunizations. You can also talk to your doctor about breastfeeding during and/or after the immunization.
- **Topical anesthetics.** Ask your pediatrician if topical numbing agents may be appropriate for your child.
- **Control your reaction.** Children are increasingly observant as they get older, and they will take careful note of your reaction. Remain calm and be mindful of your demeanor, and it may help send a message to your child that they need not be stressed either.
- **Distraction techniques.** These will vary depending on your child's age and interests, but could include telling stories and jokes, looking at a picture book or finding a hidden picture like "Where's Waldo," or blowing bubbles.
- **Positive Rewards/Treats.** Consider going out for ice cream, going on a special outing such as to the park or playground, or another small treat after your appointment to encourage good behavior, or to soothe your child.