Helping with the Pain of Vaccines

For most children, getting vaccines simply means the pain of getting a shot. Although pain is to some extent unavoidable, there are some things parents and others can do to help when children need vaccines.

**Before the shots** you can help by working as a team (child/parent/healthcare provider) with a common goal—to provide immunizations in the safest, most effective and least stressful way possible. Truthful and empathetic preparation for injections benefits everyone involved.

- **Have a positive approach**
- **Use a calm and soft voice tone**
- **Make eye contact - Be sure to be on the child’s eye level**
- **Explain why vaccines are needed**
  - “a shield to protect your body”
  - “will protect you from getting sick”,
  - “keep you well to play in the big game or go to the dance”
- **Be honest and explain what to expect**
- **Remember be aware of your voice tone, body posture and facial expression**
  - Stay calm. Use a soothing voice, smile, and make eye contact. Children pick up on the feelings of the people around them.

**During the shots** there are simple strategies parents and health care providers can use to make the process of giving vaccines easier.

- **Help the child stay still so the vaccine can be administered safely.** However, keep in mind:
  - Forcing a lying down position increases stress
  - Avoid “holding down” or overpowering the child
  - Sitting promotes a sense of control
  - Parent participation increases the child’s comfort
  - Suggested positions based on age include:
    - **Infant/Toddler (birth-23 months)**
      - Positioned on lap, arms secured by parent, facing provider
      - Positioned on exam table, legs secured by provider’s forearm across knees, upper arms secured by parent
    - **Child (2 years of age and older)**
      - Positioned on lap, sideways to nurse
      - Repositioned to opposite side for remainder of shots
      - Upper arms secured by parent, legs secured by provider
      - Older Child (4 years and older)
      - Positioned sitting on parent’s lap or exam table edge
      - Use the table edge to decrease movement (limits the ability to kick!)
      - Hugging parent; chest to chest

See handout: “Comforting Restraints for Immunizations” in the Childhood section of the 2009 AIM Provider Tool Kit [www.aimtoolkit.org](http://www.aimtoolkit.org)
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**During the shots** there are simple strategies parents and health care providers can use to make the process of giving vaccines easier.

**Distract the child during the injection process.** Try to focus the child’s attention on something else. The purpose is to offer a stimulus that will overshadow the pain or anxiety of the event. Some ideas include:

- **“Blowing away the pain”**
  Just before the shot, take out a feather, ask the child to take a deep breath, close his eyes if he wants, and then to blow out...blow, and blow on the feather or pinwheel until you or the nurse tells him to stop. The distraction of blowing on the feather was shown in one study to lessen the amount of pain perceived by the child.

- **Cold versus pain**
  Another idea is to swab a small amount of alcohol on the forearm of the opposite arm that will receive the vaccine. The child then blows on the alcohol before and during the shot. Our bodies don't feel cold and pain in the same place at the same time. Rather, with the choice of cold or pain, the body picks cold. So the feeling of pain from the shot will be reduced.

- **Touch sensation competes with pain**
- Apply continued, gentle pressure on an area

- **Distraction strategies** vary by age and include:
  - Singing
  - Counting; repetitive rhythms
  - Touching; soothing words
  - Letting the child hold the bandaid, cotton ball, sticker, etc
  - Focusing on a colorful item or picture in the room
  - Listing or talking about favorite things...toys, books, places
  - Listening to music

- **EMLA cream** For older children with severe phobias to needles, you might consider the use of an EMLA patch applied to the skin. The limitation of this technique is that the patch (which helps to numb the area) must be applied at least one hour before the injection. Also, EMLA cream works to decrease pain caused by injections under the skin (called subcutaneous injections), but doesn't lessen the pain of vaccines given in the muscles. EMLA cream requires a prescription and may not be covered by insurance plans.

**After the shots**, comfort by:

- Use pacifiers
- Holding and cuddling
- Talking lovingly and soothingly
- Giving praise:
  - “You are very brave”
  - “You did a great job”
  - “You were great at holding still”
  - “You made it go so well; thanks for helping!”
- Give out stickers or draw a smile on the band-aid
- A cool wet cloth can reduce redness, soreness, and/or swelling where the shot was given
- Asking your doctor for advice on using a non-aspirin pain reliever when you get home
- See handout: “Be There for Your Child During Shots” in the Childhood section of the 2009 AIM Provider Tool Kit [www.aimtoolkit.org](http://www.aimtoolkit.org)