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**Ways to Help Your Child through an Immunization:
Visual Strategies for Autism and Other Developmental Disorders**
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My 20-year-old son recently experienced his first tattoo. It is large, colourful and he is very proud. He described in detail the process of getting the tattoo, and the many needles (more than 20!) used to create his tattoo. He wears the tattoo as an emblem and is eagerly anticipating the next visit to the tattoo parlour.

But when I approached him to get a flu shot he panicked at the idea of receiving one needle (!)

My son with special needs will never have a tattoo. The idea of multiple needles is too overwhelming for him to consider. And, like his brother, his reaction to an immunization is to panic.

Why are we afraid of receiving an immunization? Many of us, whether we are old or young, male or female, typically developing or living with a disability, become quite anxious at the idea of a needle. We anticipate the possibility of pain, however brief, and try to avoid the experience. The reality is that any discomfort is usually very brief, and the entire process only takes a minute or two from start to finish.

While our typically developing children may fuss and drag their feet, it is usually manageable to get them to the office and get the deed done. But for our children with special needs, this 'typical' experience may seem much bigger. Couple our personal fear with our children's fear and we may become very overwhelmed. However, with some preparation and planning, this can be an easier experience for everyone.

Preparing for the Immunization Day

Even at an early age, your child can sense your emotions, so the calmer you are, the calmer your child is likely to be. If you are anxious about the idea of an immunization, your child may also feel anxious. If you do feel nervous, try using anxiety-relieving techniques. Taking a deep breath or using muscle relaxation may help you to relax. Do you have a family member or a friend who is calm, cool and collected in any situation? Ask them to go with you. Having a calming presence with you will help everyone to feel more comfortable.

When should you tell your child about the immunization appointment? If your child is developmentally under the age of seven, it is recommended you tell them one hour before the appointment. Don't give them too much time to think about it. Children may start to worry about

going for an immunization. Here are some ideas for relieving your child's anxieties, but you are the best judge for which ones might be most appropriate for your child.

- Tell your child that you or another adult will be there during the immunization.
- Talk to your child about the immunization. Explain how the immunization works. You can tell your child that the doctor or nurse is putting medicine into his/her body to keep him/her from getting sick and using a needle is the only way to get the medicine in there.
- Teach your children that doctors and nurses are nice, friendly people. They are working hard doing their jobs to keep children healthy.
- Honesty is the best policy. Immunizations do hurt, so you need to prepare your child for that. Let him/her know that it might hurt a little bit but it will not last too long.
- Prepare yourself with information about immunizations so you can answer any questions. Make sure to give all explanations in a way that your child can easily understand. Too much information can cause as much worry as not enough information, so think about your child's ability to understand. Use simple language to explain what will happen to your child at his/her level. Below, we provide three examples of ways to explain the immunization procedure to your child, using language at different levels. Choose the language level that will help your child to understand what is happening.
- But remember, when we are distressed, simple words are best. And when paired with photos, they create a picture/visual story to explain the procedure.
- Most of us would agree that "A picture is worth a thousand words". Your child may understand better using pictures. Use photos, premade pictures or make use of your artistic soul. Even stick figures can get the point across. Use whatever works for you and your child. We have included some examples of photos/visuals below.
- Finally, we have also made a video guide for you of a parent and her child using the picture/visual story during an immunization procedure. Some children may also benefit from seeing this video before they experience the "live" procedure.

Immunization Day

Consider developing a flexible plan to help make the day easier. We would like to suggest some strategies that other parents and their children have found helpful.

Waiting Strategies

- Waiting can be hard and if we can avoid it, the immunization may go more smoothly.
- Sometimes it helps the clinic to know they have a patient coming to their office with special needs so they can make your visit more comfortable. If you have an appointment, call an hour or two before the appointment to find out if the clinic is running on time. Adjust your arrival time accordingly.

- If you do have to wait, the clinic may have a quiet room where you can wait. Or you may suggest waiting in a quiet spot outside of the office and coming back when it's your turn.
- Just in case you find yourself in a busy waiting room, try to pick a spot in the room where there is less noise and movement. While some of our kids enjoy busy places and watching busy people, others will want their back to the crowd and will take comfort in the distractions you brought from home.
- Ask your child to choose a favourite toy to bring from home to play with while they are waiting (e.g., toy, iPod, book, or stuffed animal). A well-loved toy or activity can help to pass the time and reduce anxiety.
- Waiting is hard for most of us. If your child becomes impatient, it may help to have some back-up activities. Other ways that you can fill time with your child is by talking about things other than the immunization, quietly singing, listening to music, watching TV, reading a book, or blowing bubbles.

Strategies for *Before – During – After* the Immunization

- Many of us have used the *Tell-Show-Do-Reward* approach with our kids at home and school. You might want to try this approach for the immunization procedure. We are going to suggest a general strategy that you may want to adapt for your child.
- For some children, using pictures/visuals helps when going to medical appointments and during the procedure (see below for the pictures).
- Just before the injection, it might be helpful to “read” the picture/visual story about what to expect (also see link to instructional video for a demonstration).
- During the procedure, the picture/visual story may help children to do the immunization steps. Pictures/visuals help to explain what is happening and what to expect next. These can be a series of single pictures on a strip, stapled together into a flipbook, or put on a ring to explain each step. During the procedure, the pictures will show what the present step is and flipping the picture over can be a signal that the step is done, until all the steps are completed. This helps your child understand that there is a clear beginning and ending. It is a good idea to have a special treat to give to your child when the last step is done!
- For some children, shifting their attention might work better. Tell him/her to ‘blow away the hurt’ – blow really hard just before the injection. Concentrating on blowing may keep him/her from thinking about the pain.
- Offer some comfort by speaking to your child in a calm, low voice, or by sitting next to or holding him/her in your lap during the injection.
- Sit beside your child on the side opposite to the injection site and have your child squeeze your hand as hard as the pain of the needle is. This can give your child another choice to crying.
- Let your child watch the needle if they want to. If they prefer not to watch, you can be the eyes to let the child know what is happening and when it will be over.

- Your child may cry following the needle prick as a way of coping with the experience. Comfort and calm your child before you leave the office or clinic. If possible, try not to leave while your child is crying, as he/she may learn that the doctor's office is a bad place and that crying will help to make a quick escape.
- Give your child a positive end to the experience. Praise him or her for doing well, and plan to do something special and fun with him/her after the appointment.
- Don't forget to reward yourself!
- On the other hand, we know what it is like to go through this procedure with our kids with special needs. Sometimes just rustling up the courage to take our children for an immunization, and getting it done, is all we can do. That's why we have written this article for you, to hopefully make it a little easier!

Information on the Web about Immunization

<http://www.apahelpcenter.org/articles/article.php?id=194>

<http://www.childrensnational.org/Pressroom/cnmc04300901.aspx>

http://www.nncc.org/Health/immuniz_ks.html

**Visit our website to watch the instructional video,
www.respitepartnership.ning.com**

We would like to thank the health care professionals from the IWK Health Centre for their valuable suggestions. We would also like to thank Jo-Lynn Fenton, our parent consultant.

We offer a special thanks to our actors in the video, Debbie Brennan, Matthew Brennan, Jennifer Lynch, and Kate Morrison.

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Send inquires to Paula Hutchinson, Dalhousie University/IWK Autism Research Centre.

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Pictures/Visuals

These pictures were used in the video. You can cut them out and staple them together into a flipbook. We used Smarties® but it is important to use your child's favourite reward!



Nurse



Sit in Chair



Wipe Arm



Medicine



Band-aid



Treat

Here are a few ways to explain the immunization procedure to your children. Pair the words of your choice with the pictures above to make the story. The accompanying instructional video demonstrates how to use the “story” during the procedure.

Getting my Immunization

Doctor's office/clinic (use a picture that makes sense for your child)

Toy/book (hand-drawn or web/catalogue)

Nurse

Sit down.

Wipe arm.

Medicine in arm, Count 1 2 3.

Band-aid on arm.

All done! Treat

Getting my Immunization

We are going to the Doctor.

Waiting. I will play with my toy.

Then, I will see a nice nurse.

Sit down.

Wipe arm. It's little wet but that's OK.

Medicine in arm. Count. 1, 2, 3.

Band-aid on arm.

ALL DONE!

Now treat! I did a good job!

Getting my Immunization

We are going to the Doctor.

Today, I am going to meet a nice nurse.

I might have to wait but that's OK. I will play ... or I will read

First the nurse will ask me to sit down.

Next, the nurse will ask me to lift up my sleeve.

Then she will put a little wipe on my arm.

It might be a little wet but that's OK.

The nurse will put medicine in my arm.

I might feel a little hurt but maybe not. Count 1, 2, 3, and it will be all done!

Next the nurse will put a band-aid on my arm.

ALL DONE! Now I will get my treat!

I did a good job!