



# Reducing Needle Fear at Vaccine Appointments

## For children ages 3-6



### What is Needle Fear?

Needle fear is a common emotion experienced by many children at vaccine appointments. Children may express their fear of needles by crying, hiding, kicking and screaming when talking about or seeing needles. It often begins during preschool years and can make medical appointments stressful for families and healthcare providers. It is important to address needle fear so it does not worsen and persist later in life. Thankfully, research-backed strategies exist to help overcome this anxiety. Each child is unique and may require a different combination of strategies; it takes time to explore what work best.

### Strategies to Help Your Child

**(Remember A-B-C-D)**

#### A Apply Anesthetics

Numbing medicines (also called topical anesthetics) are a safe and effective way to make the experience more comfortable for your child. Creams, ointments and patches are available over-the-counter. Depending on the brand, numbing medicine must be applied 30-60 minutes before receiving an injection, so consider applying the cream at home or while you wait in the clinic.



**Watch a video** to learn more about topical anesthetics available in Canada and how to use them

#### Medicine-Free Options for Reducing Pain:

- Bring ice or a cold compress to the appointment and apply to the injection site for a few minutes before and after the injection. Cold is even more effective when paired with vibration (ex: massage device, [Buzzy](#)).
- Rub the injection site firmly for 30 seconds before and after the needle is inserted.
- Have your child sit up and relax their muscles. Studies show that lying down and tensing muscles can make needles more painful for kids.

#### B Be Honest

**Avoid** promises you can't keep

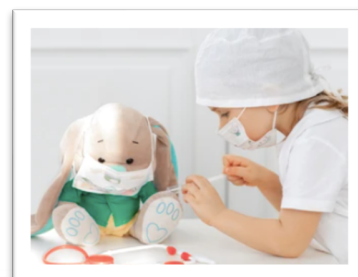
- "It won't hurt"
- "It will all be over soon"
- "You're fine" or "it's okay"

Instead, **prepare your child for what to expect** a few days before the visit

- Together, watch a video or read a book about getting vaccines
- Encourage learning through play. Have your child give you or his/her teddy bear a shot with a toy syringe
- Have your child attend a kid-friendly educational event on vaccines

Studies show that falsely reassuring your child can actually make vaccines more upsetting and painful. Instead, prepare your child for the experience through videos, books, or play.

**Focus on the benefits** of getting vaccines: a healthier body and protection from getting sick!





## Calm Emotions

Try the following techniques to soothe your child before and during their vaccine appointment:

- Be present or arrange for a person your child trusts to be present during the appointment.
- Hold your child on your lap. Close contact can be very comforting for children.
- **Model calm behaviour**; children learn how to effectively regulate their emotions through observing positive examples.
- Encourage your child to take **slow, deep belly breaths** for 2 minutes. It helps if you do it together.
- Let your child blow bubbles to naturally slow down breathing and incorporate play into their visit. **Pinwheels** are a great non-messy alternative.
- Help them use their imagination to picture things that make them happy and calm. Bring them to their favorite place outdoors- what do they feel, smell, see, hear, taste?

## Distract

Studies show that the more time children spend focusing on the needle, the more nervous they become and the higher they rate their pain. Distraction comes in many forms, including:

- Playing games such as **I Spy**, **Rock Paper Scissors**, or **20 questions**. Encourage them to continue playing during and after the injection.
- Bringing a tablet or device to play cartoons and games. Offer them some control by allowing them to choose what they would like to watch or play.
- Encouraging your child to bring an interactive toy or game. Things that require concentration and brain power (for example, puzzles, matching games, and word searches) are more effective at distracting children than passive activities (such as watching a screen).
- Playing their favorite song.



## Helpful Resources

### Resources for Parents

1. [Preparing for a Positive Experience](#)
2. [Strong Kids Strong Mind](#)
3. [Reducing the Pain of Vaccinations: A Parent's Guide](#)
4. [Montreal Children's Hospital](#)

### Resources for Kids

1. [It doesn't have to hurt!](#) (video)
2. [SuperMeg Personal Poke Plan](#) (online resource)
3. [Dylan's Big Surprise at the Doctor: Not So Scary Shot](#) by Kishma Anthony (book)
4. [The Saturday Shot: A Nellie Park Adventure](#) by Morgan Thomas (book)
5. [Dr. Bear Visits by the Reading Bear Society](#) (educational events and book)

