

What has change-of-focus to do with fear of needles?

A child's fear and protest of venipunctures often create an acutely stressful situation for both the child and parents; the latter may experience themselves as powerless. Not only toddlers and pre-adolescents express high levels of distress during venipuncture but also in anticipation of the procedure.

In recent years, the uses of pharmacological intervention such as EMLA cream and other local anesthetics have distress-reducing effect but only at the actual venipuncture phase. However, for the management of the anticipatory anxiety and fear of pain, it is well established that through the use of change-of-focus techniques. That includes distraction, visualization, relaxation and hypnosis are effective for both the anticipation as well as actual venipuncture phases.

How does it work? Basically it is by altering the perception in the brain. The brain and body are powerfully connected. A mother's kiss or gentle rubbing is almost an automatic response to distract and comfort a child from a minor acute pain. Only recently have electronencephalogram (EEGs) and positron emission tomography (PET) allowed us to begin to understand the changes observed in the brain itself during deep relaxation and hypnotic induction. The use of relaxation and hypnosis techniques is not new in haemophilia community. It is historic lore that Rasputin used hypnosis to assist the haemophilic Czarevitch in the control of bleeding and pain. Dr. Wallace Lebow taught a group of school boys with haemophilia in 1975 and the renowned psychiatrist and hypnotherapist, Dr. Karen Olness, who co-authored a pamphlet with Dr. David Agle in 1981 on Self-hypnosis in Hemophilia, published by NHF. They all reported successes in group self-hypnosis with children, their families and adults with hemophilia for control of pain, reduction of bleeding and to relax during venipuncture. Children learn relaxation imagery exercises more quickly than do adults because of their natural skill in the use of imagination.

It is unrealistic expectations that one technique "fits all". Teaching children various change-of-focus coping techniques gives them lifelong skills to deal with stressful, fearful or much desired performance skills. Herbert Benson and his colleagues at Harvard published a study in 2000 which demonstrated that students from middle school who had been trained in relaxation and self-care strategies had higher grade point averages, work habits scores and cooperation scores than students who have fewer exposures. Along with Biofeedback, relaxation, visualization and hypnosis are researched and utilized extensively for the management of pain, fibromyalgia and other musculoskeletal and vascular pain syndromes.

To sum up, to acquire some of these change-o-focus techniques is to enhance the child's self-efficacy and mastery. It not only empowers them in handling acute crisis but also strengthen development of autonomy, self-responsibility and self-enhancement.

Managing Needle phobia/fear with medical play - Medical play is a powerful tool to see where a child is in his understanding of what is happening to him. I have had kids when we do needle play actually take the needle and stick the doll over and over as this was their perception of what was happening.. That way you can clear up with them what is the corrective way of handling.

I would start with a coping plan that he creates with easy realistic choices. This will help him have some control. He can put on a big poster and decorate that way it is truly his plan. Then once he makes it put it up for all to see.

For example:

- Where do you want to sit? (if at home) on the couch or at the kitchen table. (I would keep his room as a "no procedure" zone if possible)
- What flavor do you want your mask today? (Making the mask smell good often helps- you only need smelly chapstick to put on the inside of the mask or on his lips, this also help desensitize him to the mask as he has an option to play with it prior)
- This will take as long as a cartoon or as long as you to color this picture - Which activity should we do? (he will need a time frame he can understand)

Then do the same thing with the plan.

- I would use a position of comfort. Do you want to sit next to the table and hug mom or do you want to sit on a chair in moms lap.?
- Distraction technique? Bubbles or magic wand for such a short procedure.
- Reward? sticker or coloring sheet. Reward system could be put in place. Stickers for each success, then the reward at the end of the week could be a trip to a favorite park or to get a happy meal. Toys don't make the best prize when its something you need to do for a long time. For younger kids sometimes the sticker is enough prize. No reason to make it complicated.

Example - Spiderman came to the rescue

- *Marvin, 3-1/2 yrs old, was referred to me because of his severe fear of needle (needle phobic) and he has a bleeding disorder that required factor replacement through IV infusion. Fortunately, Marvin likes art activities. With his mother's permission and Marvin's cooperation, I used simple, soothing rhythmic language along with a pictorial chart/figures chosen by Marvin and developed with him a 3-step pictorial procedure chart to administer his infusion. Step 1. Get set with the Spiderman. Step 2. Choose the arm and prepare the IV site. Step 3. Deliver the medicine. Finally, home free with a spiderman bandage.*

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