

Age Appropriate Competencies: Caring for Children

Characteristics	Appropriate Caregiver Actions
Toddlers (1-3)	
Concrete thinking; literal interpretation of words.	Use simple terms. Give one direction at a time.
Have not learned to share.	Don't tell child you're going to "take" vitals.
Separation from caregiver is very stressful.	Allow caregiver to stay and hold child on their lap.
Love to move around.	Only hold the child down for safety reasons.
Preschoolers (3-5)	
Transitional phase; becoming more independent and self-sufficient.	Allow to remove tape and do other things to help.
Magical thinking; make things happen by wishing. May think illness/injury is a punishment.	Reassure that they are not the cause of illness/injury to themselves or others. Reassure that your care is not a punishment. Praise cooperation.
Concrete thinking; literal interpretation of words.	Explain CAT scan is not a cat, I.V. is not a plant. Avoid using "bad" – will not understand "bad cough."
Asks lots of questions; easy to overestimate comprehension.	Use simple explanations and examples. Describe something by relating it to their senses.
Think a break in the skin makes the insides "leak out."	Use bandages whenever possible, they are seen as comforting and protective.
Respond well to games.	Incorporate games and play whenever possible (i.e. blowing bubbles). Offer choices when possible.
School Age (6-11)	
Developing a sense of accomplishment. Success helps develop self-esteem.	Offer praise for independence, self-care, and responsibility.
At about age 7 they move from magical thinking to logical thought. Illness is no longer seen as a punishment. Begin to understand cause and effect.	Explaining "If you take your medicine, your heart will be stronger," makes sense.
Understand the concept of time, long term consequences of illness, know death is irreversible.	Tell how much time is left for procedure or treatment. Offer to count the time down.
Afraid of losing control, want to be around peers. Fearful of being too dependent on parents.	Offer the choice of having parent or caregiver present during exam or treatment. Ask them to be your helper.