



# OVERCOMING FEAR OF Needles and Shots

Lindsey Biel, M.A., OTR/L

No one likes getting immunizations or having blood drawn. A needle piercing the skin can be painful and scary, and losing a sense of control over one's body can be very distressing. Since there is no way to avoid needles altogether, here are some strategies that can help lessen the pain and worry.

## **Educate and Model Calm**

Anxiety is contagious, so prepare yourself with facts and minimize your own distress as much as possible. You will then be in a better state of mind to provide the right amount of information to meet your child's needs.

For some kids — and adults — simply going to the doctor is frightening. It might be helpful to visit the doctor's office when your child is *not* going to be treated. You could go to the office just to greet the doctor or ask if your child could listen to his/her own heart or get a tongue depressor to decorate. These are good ways for kids to learn that doctors and nurses are friendly and helpful. You could call doctors by their first names to make them more relatable. If your child loves animals or is a car enthusiast, find out if the doctor has a cat or a dog, or what kind of car he/she drives.

Many of our kids thrive on routine and predictability. It may help them to know exactly what will happen during the office visit *and* what will happen after, such as receiving a special treat or going to the playground. Others become anxious if they have too much information.

If it makes sense for your family, let your child watch as you receive an inoculation. Let your child know that it pinched for a few seconds, but then it was over and you feel great. If your child's not present, show him/her a selfie of you being a superhero. However, if certain visuals overstimulate your child, just share how fast and easy it was.

## **Breathe Deeply**

When we get worked up about something, such as getting a needle, our bodies become stressed. This triggers the sympathetic nervous system which leads to a fight-or-flight response. The body starts pumping out a chemical called cortisol, our heart beats more quickly, and we may take rapid shallow breaths. One of the best ways to stimulate your child's parasympathetic nervous system is through controlled breathing. This system helps the body and brain to calm down.

If you tell your anxious child to breathe deeply and relax, he/she will probably not be able to do so. Instead, get your child to focus on breathing *out* by roaring like a lion, blowing feathers off your hand, using a whistle or kazoo, or blowing through a straw into a bowl of soapy water to make a mountain of bubbles. Once the skill is learned, teach your child to breathe in through the nose, as if smelling flowers, and exhale through the mouth, as if blowing out birthday candles. There are great videos online that help kids learn to breathe deeply, including one called *Take 5 Breathing*.

## Positive Distraction

Provide fun distractions to redirect attention both before and during the procedure. A fun new fidget toy, a favorite video, a picture book, an activity book, or a discussion about cute pets or taking a vacation can distract everyone from the impending poke.

If necessary, and possible, go outside of the waiting room so that you and your child aren't sitting around and getting anxious. In a low traffic area, you can do wall push-ups, run laps, take giant steps, take mouse steps, play Simon Says, or engage in another movement game to pass the time and redirect energy.

## Reduce Discomfort

The poke of a needle can hurt but lasts for just a few seconds. Kids that are more sensitive, however, can find the experience to be traumatic, especially if they don't understand why this is happening to their bodies.

Before the visit, speak with the doctor's office about pretreating with a numbing cream or spray. You can also block pain signals to the brain by icing the area. Many kids are helped by Buzzy®, a tool that tricks the body's nerves into feeling cold and vibration instead of pain signals. It distracts your child physically, as well as visually, since it looks like a cute bumblebee.

It's usually best to get immunizations or have blood drawn in the non-dominant arm. That way your child will be less likely to notice a sore arm when playing later. If your child's arm hurts after the needle, apply a warm compress or ice pack to the affected area. You can also give your child an over-the-counter pain medication that your pediatrician recommends, such as acetaminophen, *after* an immunization or blood draw.



[www.Buzzyhelps.com](http://www.Buzzyhelps.com)

## Reward, Reward, Reward!

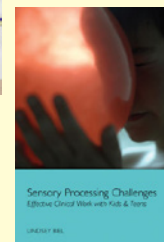
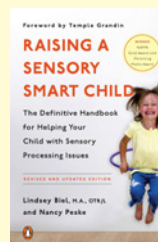
Acknowledge your child's bravery, even if it took a few people to help. After all, your child just took a big step toward a healthier body. A toy, ice cream cone or some other reward is a wonderful way to recognize this step and to move towards less stressful shots and needle pokes in the future.



Lindsey Biel, M.A., OTR/L is a pediatric occupational therapist with a private practice in New York City where she evaluates and treats children, adolescents, and young adults with sensory processing issues, developmental delays, autism spectrum disorders, and other challenges. With the COVID-19 pandemic, she now offers teletherapy to families and schools nationwide.

Lindsey is co-author of the award-winning *Raising a Sensory Smart Child: The Definitive Handbook for Helping Your Child with Sensory Processing Issues*, with a foreword by Temple Grandin. She is also the author of *Sensory Processing Challenges: Effective Clinical Work with Kids & Teens* and has authored two chapters in Dr. William Steele's book *Optimizing Learning Outcomes* as well as contributed to the all-new edition of Kim West's classic *Good Night, Sleep Tight*.

Visit Lindsey's websites at [www.sensorysmarts.com](http://www.sensorysmarts.com) and [www.sensoryprocessingchallenges.com](http://www.sensoryprocessingchallenges.com) for downloadable checklists, articles, webcasts and more.



The strategies and techniques discussed in this article are not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a medical professional that is familiar with your child and your child's medical history. Always consult with a medical professional regarding your child's health.

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