



Helping your Toddler with Anxiety around going to the Doctor

It is quite common for toddlers to be anxious or nervous about going to the doctor. There are many reasons for this. Many toddlers find going to a new place or meeting new people frightening. Sometimes, it is as a result of a previous experience, such as a vaccination or feeling sick. There may also be no clear reason for their fear and that is also fine.

The first thing to remember if your toddler finds this hard is that it is normal and nothing to be concerned about. Many children will have this fear and more often than not, they will grow out of it like the many feelings and fears that seem so strong in the pre-school years. Likewise, do not worry about what your healthcare professional thinks or the other people in the waiting room, as everyone will understand how natural this is for young children.

There are times when it is important to go to the doctor. But there are also times when it isn't. For example, when your toddler is only there to accompany you, or when a phone call with a parent or carer would suffice. Do not put them through the unnecessary worry of a trip to the doctor if you are able to avoid it.

How to make a trip to the doctor fun for a toddler

Toddlers love rewards and sticker charts, and these can be really useful for doctor's visits. Your little one can help you design it and choose the sticker they will get each time.



Dr Ellie Cannon
General Practitioner

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If regular hospital or medical appointments are necessary for them, make a special item that is just for those trips. This could be a bag with a special set of pens, a favourite book or a beloved toy that is only for those appointments. Toy medical bags can also be a great way to make the doctor fun. This gives them something to look forward to and rely on during fearful times. It gives everyone something to focus on rather than the fear.

Using toys, books and programmes that focus on the fun aspects of medical appointments in their everyday play, can also help. Dress-up is a great way to do this and it can be done naturally as part of normal play time, separate from any appointments.

How to make a trip to the doctor less scary for a toddler

Toddlers do not need lots of advance warning about appointments like adults do. You don't want it to be a nasty sudden surprise for them but telling them calmly beforehand is all they need. When adults know children are going to be fearful, sometimes the adult nerves and words can unfortunately aggravate things. Keep things calm and relaxed, even if you know things could be difficult.

Be reassured, like many things at this stage, a toddler's anxiety around going to the doctor or hospital is usually something they grow out of.



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About the contributor

Dr Ellie Cannon is a leading NHS GP with a particular interest in family health. She is familiar to many as the doctor for the Mail on Sunday and has appeared regularly on This Morning, BBC Breakfast, Sky News, and ITV News. In 2022, she was recognised by the medical journalists' association for her writing on mental health. Ellie's most recent book, *Is Your Job Making You Ill?* focuses on health issues at work.



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