



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Preparing Children for Difficult Events

Parents often face the question about whether or not to upset their child by announcing an upcoming event that the child doesn't want to happen, such as a visit to a doctor and dentist. The issue to consider is whether there is any value in the child through the distress. As always, we base our advice on an understanding of a child's internal development and a judgment about how to best build his or her lifelong strengths and capacities.

The capacity to prepare: Children are busy building the personality, character and emotional capacities necessary for their success in adulthood. One of the important emotional capacities that they must develop is what we call at Lucy Daniels Center the "capacity to prepare." The capacity to prepare involves being able to anticipate what lies ahead and to make appropriate mental adjustments. We may not realize how much we rely on preparation every day. Consider how frequently we think about upcoming events, often fleetingly and often semi-consciously. This anticipation of what lies ahead in the next second, hour or day stimulates a helpful mental adjustment. For example, we may visualize a scene, organize a task, or quickly imagine a possible interaction. This process is so familiar and automatic that we don't think twice about it.

Some adults are unable to rely on a well-developed capacity to prepare. They may not prepare enough, leaving them with fewer effective coping strategies and more susceptible to excessive negative emotions. Other adults try to prepare, but when they're unable to call upon effective coping strategies, their efforts turn into unproductive worrying.

Building the capacity to prepare: Parents are well advised to help children build up the capacity to prepare because of its importance to healthy emotional functioning. The best way that to help a child build up this capacity

is through guided exposure to situations that require preparation.

Parents commonly use bedtime rituals to teach a child about preparation. Bedtime is a challenging emotional time for a child because it involves a disturbing separation from the world and loved ones. The bedtime rituals provide a variety of strategies that help the child build up inner strength to manage the challenging time ahead. These strategies include engaging in repetitive activities or thoughts that provide a sense that the world is orderly, dependable and safe; filling up with good feelings from loved ones; and exerting autonomy through choices in the bed-time ritual that offer a sense of influence or control to compensate for the child's lack of control about the choice of going to bed. The well-functioning adult or older child will later engage in mental activity that is built upon such behavioral coping strategies by, for example, thinking of the familiar aspects of a situation, bringing to mind comforting thoughts about loved ones, or imagining how they will choose to act.

We can apply this orientation by considering the common question: How much in advance should a parent prepare a young child, three to five years of age, for an evening baby-sitter. We recommend that parents inform their child at least several hours in advance of the baby-sitter's arrival. Of course, the child may become upset when told the news. However, the child's reaction will provide parents with an opportunity to help her or him build inner strength that she or he can use to surmount the countless upsets that he or she will continue to have throughout his life. Parents can remind their child how much he or she likes the baby sitter. In that way, parents will be teaching their child that reminding oneself of the positive and comforting aspects of a situation is one way to overcome upset feelings. Parents can tell their child that they realize that she or he would rather be with Mommy and Daddy than with the baby sitter. By providing comfort through an understanding of their child's preferences and wishes, parents will be demonstrating that authentic human contact and empathy can soothe painful feelings. Parents can also allow their child some regression by tolerating a bit more clingy or fussy behavior at dinner. Parental tolerance in this situation will teach a child that she or he can turn to others for temporary extra help when overwhelmed by feelings. Parents can remind their child from time to time that the baby-sitter will be coming, even though she or he does not bring the topic up himself. In so doing, parents will be teaching their child that avoidance is not the preferred way to deal with an upcoming difficult

event. Parents can also try to engage their child in planning for greeting the baby-sitter. Perhaps their child would like to get her or his favorite game or book out, have a stuffed animal downstairs, or make a picture to say hello. These preparatory efforts will help a child learn that she or he can make active and effective behavioral preparations as well as active mental and verbal preparations. Over time, with repetition, these various coping strategies will become an inside part of a child, occurring in her or his own mind through thoughts and symbols.

There are situations in which advance notice is inadvisable. Preparation is unhelpful when advance notice leaves a child overwhelmed, miserable and unable to benefit from efforts to prepare.

Although preparing a child will probably not help her or his upset in the short run, excessively sparing a child from upset deprives her or him of the chance to build a capacity to deal with upset in the future. With parental assistance, a child will grow in the capacity to prepare and will develop an important emotional competency for dealing with the ups and downs of life.