



Division for
Children & Youth with Special Health Needs
Tips for Parents and Caregivers of Children
Ages 4-6
First Steps for Talking to Your Child about His Health



As parents and caregivers, you play the most important role in beginning to teach your child about his special health needs. Over the years and with your guidance, he will develop the necessary skills to actively participate in his care.



All children develop at different rates and the age range given is intended only as a guideline. You are the best judge of how and when you begin discussions with your child based on their cognitive or developmental abilities.

It may be helpful to keep a notebook with your child's medical information. You can include description(s) of your child's health problems(s), up-to-date list of medicines and dosages, allergies, special equipment, notes from doctor appointments and hospital stays, along with any test results.

Directions: Resources for Your Child's Care, an organizing notebook and a resource guide, can be a useful tool for organizing your child's information and can be found at www.mass.gov/dph/specialhealthneeds/directions.



In addition to these tips, the following website has lots of checklists, resources and suggestions to help you as you begin to talk with your child about their health issues, www.mass.gov/dph/youthtransition.



1. Begin by explaining your child's medical problems to him in simple terms. Start small - you can get more detailed as your child grows and can understand more.

- Perhaps you might begin by asking your child what he understands about his health condition so you can correct any misconceptions.
- Try to use easy-to-understand descriptions whenever possible. For instance, you might describe lungs as balloons, airways as pipes, etc.
- Help him to understand the warning signs that he may be getting sick and how to let you or another trusted adult (relative, babysitter, teacher and school nurse) know.
- Encourage your child to pay attention to his body and to speak up if he notices any changes.



- 2. Begin to talk to your child about his medicine, equipment and treatments.**
- You might begin by explaining how his medicine, treatments or equipment helps him. For example, it will take away pain or help him breathe easier.
 - It is important that he begins to understand that he should never take anyone else's medicine or share his medicine.

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- 3. Begin to talk with your child about any special foods he may need to keep him healthy or why he may need to receive his nutrition differently, like through a feeding tube.**
- 4. It is important for your child to know what he is allergic to, and to have him practice telling people about foods or other things he must avoid.**
 - Help him understand what happens when he has an allergy. For example - does he get itchy? Is it hard to breathe? Does he get a rash?
 - Make sure he knows what to do if he is exposed. For example, does he need an EPI pen?
 - You may want to role-play an emergency situation with him, just like when he practices a fire drill.
 - You may want to consider having your child wear an emergency bracelet that lists all their allergies.
- 5. Practice with your child what to do if he does not feel well and you are not with him. Be sure your child understands how to use 911.**
- 6. Tell your child the names of doctors and other health providers; and, what each one does to help him feel better.**
- 7. Try encouraging your child to communicate with his healthcare providers as much as possible.**
 - It may be helpful to write down any questions he may have before doctor appointments.
 - You can ask him beforehand if he would like to ask the questions or if he would like you to.
- 8. Encourage your child to be as independent as possible and to participate at whatever level he can in activities such as helping with chores or playing with friends.**
- 9. Your child may need special accommodations to be successful in school.**
 - Your child's school team should work with you to develop a comprehensive Individual Health Care Plan (IHCP) in addition to an IEP or 504 accommodations.
 - Work with your child's healthcare team to see if your child may be eligible for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 plan.

Note: An IEP will identify your child's learning style. In addition, the IEP includes the academic areas where your child will need assistance and includes how his progress will be measured.

Note: A 504 plan is an accommodation plan that lists the specific assistance your child needs so your child has the same opportunity to learn as his peers. For example, your child may require an elevator to move between floors.