

### Taking medication

We often get asked to support children who are reluctant to take medication. Just as it is common for young children to go through stages of picky eating, children can often have some difficulty with taking medication. This is common for children up to 6 years and can be due to a range of things e.g. taste, lack of control and insufficient understanding to name a few. Below are some hints and tips you can try which may help:

#### Explain why

If your child is old enough, explain to them why they need to take their medicine in an age and stage appropriate way. Explanations may include:

“Your ear needs some help to get better. This medicine will help your ear so it’s not poorly anymore”

“This medicine will stop your ear hurting”

“This medicine will make you better so you can go back to school to play with your friends”.

If you want to get extra creative, some children respond well if you include their interests, making your explanation engaging and motivating for them, e.g. Paw Patrol:

“Your ear infection is making you feel poorly so you need medicine to make you better. The medicine is like the pups emergency response on Paw Patrol! Everything in the medicine will work together to protect you and make you better.” Or role play with your child’s favourite Paw Patrol character, e.g. “Timmy has an ear infection and needs medicine to make him better. Chase is on the case! Take the medicine I sent you Timmy and you will be better in no time”.

#### Give choices

When children are poorly they often experience a loss of control. Giving children a certain amount of control can help when it comes to complying with taking medication. Choices you can offer may include:

-How they take their medication. Firstly, measure your child’s medicine as directed, then give them a choice of how to take it e.g. “would you like your medicine in a syringe or on a spoon today?” or “your Peppa Pig cup or a syringe?” or “you can choose what spoon you’d like to use today and bring it to mummy”.

-Where they take their medicine e.g. “Where would you like to sit to take your medicine today?” Or “On mummy or daddy’s lap?” or “In the kitchen or mummy’s room?”

-Who gives them their medicine e.g. “mummy or daddy” or “are you going to do it yourself or would you like mummy’s help?” It is important to note strict supervision is always recommended if you allow your child to give their medicine to themselves.

#### Positivity

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As a parent or carer, you are your child's role model, so they will look to you for how to react. If they see you taste or smell the medicine and grimace they are likely to do the same. Likewise they will be unlikely to comply if they hear you saying "they won't take that", even if you know that's true. Positive phrases you could try may include "we are learning to like different medicines" or "we will work as a team to take your medicine" or "I think it smells of bananas what do you think?".

Try using as much praise and positive reinforcements as you can E.g. instead of "take your medicine or no Xbox" try "Wow. Well done that was a really good taste. Just a little bit more and you can put a sticker on your chart" or "even though you don't want to your trying really hard. That makes mummy so happy". Using hospital or injections as a threat if your child refuses to take their medication may reinforce that these are bad and lead to anxiety in the future.

## Reward

Try different incentives as a reward for taking medicine. This might be putting a star on a chart or earning a small reward. If your child is finding taking medication particularly difficult, they may need an easily achieved goal e.g. an immediate small treat or reward. As your child grows in confidence, you can make the reward a bit more challenging e.g. earn 5 stickers before earning a reward. This strategy encourages positivity and gives your child attention for their good behaviour rather than bad.

## Taste

It is common for taste to be a big factor in why children won't take medicine. The following may help to make the medicine taste better:

-Ask your pharmacist if the medicine comes in any different flavours to try. If so, involve your child in choosing which flavour to give them control.

-Ask your pharmacist if the medicine comes in any other forms that your child may like better e.g. tablets, chewable tablets etc.

-Try mixing the medicine with something to make it taste better; you can get your child involved in this too. If you mix it with a drink, make sure it is small and quite concentrated. Children are more likely to finish something smaller and you want it strongly flavoured to cover the medicine taste. Popular choices include mixing with a small amount of their favourite drink, yoghurt, chocolate spread, honey etc. Always check with your GP before you mix your child's medication as some may not be effective when mixed with certain foods.

-Have a drink or treat on hand for your child to have immediately after to take the taste away.

-Having something very cold such as an ice lolly may numb the tongue to disguise the taste of some medicines.

## Fun

Children learn through play and this is often a good strategy when a child is learning to like medication. Through play your child will be able to explore what is expected of them, learn new coping strategies, play out different scenarios and process what has happened. Play ideas that could help may include:

-Change the way your child takes their medicine. Once you have measured the correct dose, have it in tiny tea cups as part of a teddy bears picnic or tea party.

-Make taking the medicine into a game. Pretend you have medicine too and see who can take it the fastest. Providing it is safe to do so, mix it into a small strong chocolate milkshake. Give two cups of milkshake and challenge them to guess which has the medicine in.

-If it is safe to do so, make it look fun by putting sprinkles on top and calling it something different. Yellow sprinkles could transform it into “minion medicine”, or multicolour sprinkles could be “unicorn medicine”, the possibilities are endless.

-Use role-play. Get your child’s favourite figures, teddies or dolls out to play with as well as a range syringes and spoons. You could try joining in too, so, you could become Spiderman who is worried he won’t like the taste but finds a way to overcome it, or Elsa who eats an ice lolly to freeze her tongue so she can’t taste it.

-If your child likes crafts, they may like to decorate their medicine syringe or small medicine cup with stickers.

## Consistency

As with all new strategies, consistency is important and it is likely you will need to try a technique a few times before you see if it is likely to work. It is important to remember every child is different and what works well for one child may not work for another.

## Contact details

### Health Play Specialist

Telephone number: 0300 019 8383

For further general health-related information, please ask the relevant department for an information prescription or contact:

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