Pain Management for Children

Pain is whatever the person says it is! Pain is an unpleasant feeling that indicates actual or potential injury to the body. Pain can be physical, emotional, social, or spiritual. Inadequate pain relief can be distressing to the person experiencing pain.

Children of all ages feel pain. They may not be able to verbally express they are in pain so assessment and observation is very important. When persons cannot verbally express their pain assessing pain can be challenging for the healthcare professionals. It is important to include the family or consistent caregivers in observing for and managing of the pain. The family/caregiver's insight will provide a valuable resource for healthcare providers.

Children may express pain in different ways, such as they may sleep more, play differently, become irritable, or have other behavior changes. They may use words like oowie, boo-boo, or ouchy to describe pain. Children may not report pain because the fear needles or may have to take medicine but it is important to relieve the pain for the child’s comfort and quality of life.

Pain management is individualized for the child according to the type of pain, age, illness, and goals. Appropriate interventions include pharmacological (using medications) and non-pharmacological (non-medications) approaches. Regular reassessment is required because the child’s condition may change which could affect the pain management regimen.

**Pain management for infants up to 2 years of age**
- Infants can feel pain. Neonates can feel pain starting at 23-24 gestational weeks
- Use the same pain scale consistently to assess pain. Pain scales for infants may include observations such as cry, expressions, activity and/or consolability
- Pain medication is dosed by the child’s weight
- Non-pharmacological interventions may include massage, swaddling, holding, dimmed lights

**Pain management for children ages 2-7**
- At the age of 2, children have a fully developed nervous system
- Use the same pain scale consistently to assess pain. Pain scales for this young children may include drawings and coloring, "Pieces of Pain" Poker Chip Tool, or the Wong-Baker FACES
- Children may not admit to pain for fear of having to take medicine
- Pain medication is dosed by the child’s weight
- Non-pharmacological interventions may include massage, distraction, hearing familiar voices
Pain management for children ages 8-11
- Children as young as 8 can describe their pain using numeric scales or faces pain scales
- Use the same pain scale consistently to assess pain. Pain scales for the child may include the visual analog scale or numeric scale
- Pain medication is dosed by the child’s weight or by using adult dosing criteria
- Non-pharmacological interventions may include massage, guided imagery, art, music

Pain management for adolescents
- Adolescents are cognitively adults
- Have emotional needs: desire to be involved in the process; respect their privacy; respect their report of pain
- Use the same pain scale consistently to assess pain. Pain scales for the adolescent may include the 0-10 numeric scale
- Pain medication is dosed by the child’s weight or by using adult dosing criteria
- Non-pharmacological interventions may include massage, relaxation exercises, guided imagery, art, music, meditation

Pain medication
- Medication is prescribed specifically for the child
- There are many different types of pain medications. Medications are prescribed according to the type of pain, severity, age, and goals

What to report to the hospice/palliative care team
- Unrelieved pain, agitation
- Side effects from the pain medication
- Feelings of hopelessness or depression
- Difficulty sleeping or sleeping more

What you can do
- Support the nurse’s instructions. Medications should be taken as ordered
- Observe for signs of unrelieved pain and report to the nurse
- Provide non-pharmacological interventions such as massage, music, calm environment, relaxation exercises
- Provide support to the child and family

Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at www.HPNA.org

References
Lynch M, Rugg M. “Pain Management for All Ages: 0-100 in 90 minutes.” Presentation at the HPNA 5th Annual Clinical Practice Forum, Hospice and Palliative Nurses Association; Sep 16-17, 2011: Pittsburgh, PA.


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