



PSYCH HACKS

Five Ways to Make Insulin Shots Less of a Pain...Literally and Figuratively!

In the period shortly following a T1D diagnosis, it is normal for children to experience some level of fear and anxiety around insulin shots. For some children, however, the fear and anxiety can persist well past the first few months following a diagnosis. This can make an already difficult task even more emotionally taxing for both parents and children. Fortunately, there are many ways you can help your child manage and overcome fear and anxiety surrounding insulin shots. Below are five specific ways to help your child achieve a higher comfort level with the procedure.

#1: Minimize the Unknown and Unknowable

The more uncertainty in a given situation, the more likely that situation will breed fear and anxiety. A great way to help a child who is anxious around insulin shots is to increase their sense of perceived *controllability* and *predictability* over the procedure. For example, allowing your child to choose the injection site or which parent will administer the shot gives your child a greater sense of perceived control. Similarly, encouraging your child to do a 5 or 10-second countdown before the parent performs the actual injection makes the procedure more predictable. Over time, increasing your child's perceived controllability and predictability lowers their anxiety.

#2: Start Small

In some cases, a child may pull out all the stops to try and avoid or escape an insulin shot. When the anxiety is at this level, it is best to take small, incremental steps toward the ultimate goal of anxiety-free insulin shots. For example, start out by having your child participate in age appropriate preparatory activities (e.g., getting the insulin pen ready). Gradually have your child become more and more involved in the process until they are administering the shot independently. Taking a more gradual approach helps your child garner a sense of competence in their ability to safely give themselves an insulin shot.



#3: When to Use Rewards

Avoiding situations that elicit anxiety only serves to strengthen the anxiety in the long run. Rewards help spark that initial motivation a child needs to engage in an anxiety provoking activity and thus break the vicious cycle of avoidance. Rewards work best when they are small but frequent (i.e., each time your child does an insulin shot or participates in the process), there exists a variety of reward options, and the reward is given almost immediately after the shot is complete.



A word of caution on using rewards

Positive reinforcement (i.e., rewards) can be a powerful tool in helping a child overcome anxiety around insulin shots. However, rewards are typically not recommended for a child who regularly adheres to the procedure and does so with minimal distress. Finally, if using rewards, it is important to gradually fade out the use of rewards over time as your child becomes less anxious and more adherent with insulin shots.

#4: Distraction Helps

The power of distraction cannot be understated. Particularly for a young child who hasn't developed other strategies to self-regulate distress, distraction helps redirect the child's attention away from the painful procedure. Distraction works best when it is both *simple* and *engaging* (e.g., petting the dog during the shot, listening to music, or watching a favorite television show). Oftentimes, however, a child may be more distressed during the anticipation or build-up than during the actual shot itself. In such cases, it may be wise to have two separate distraction activities: one for the actual shot and another to help with the anticipatory distress.

#5: Encourage and Praise Coping Skills

If there is a silver lining when it comes to insulin shots, it is the unique opportunity a child has to practice the critical life skill of managing distress. Parents are also in a unique position to encourage and praise use of healthy coping skills in their children. From taking deep breaths to making positive self-statements (e.g., I can do this), these strategies help a child to regulate their emotions and lower distress. Parents can help by modeling such positive coping strategies and praising their children when coping-promoting behaviors are used during the procedure.



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