

A photograph of a healthcare setting. In the foreground, a young girl with dark hair is lying in a hospital bed, looking up towards a nurse. The nurse, a woman with blonde hair, is wearing green scrubs and a black lanyard with a badge that says 'St. Luke Hospital'. She is smiling down at the patient. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

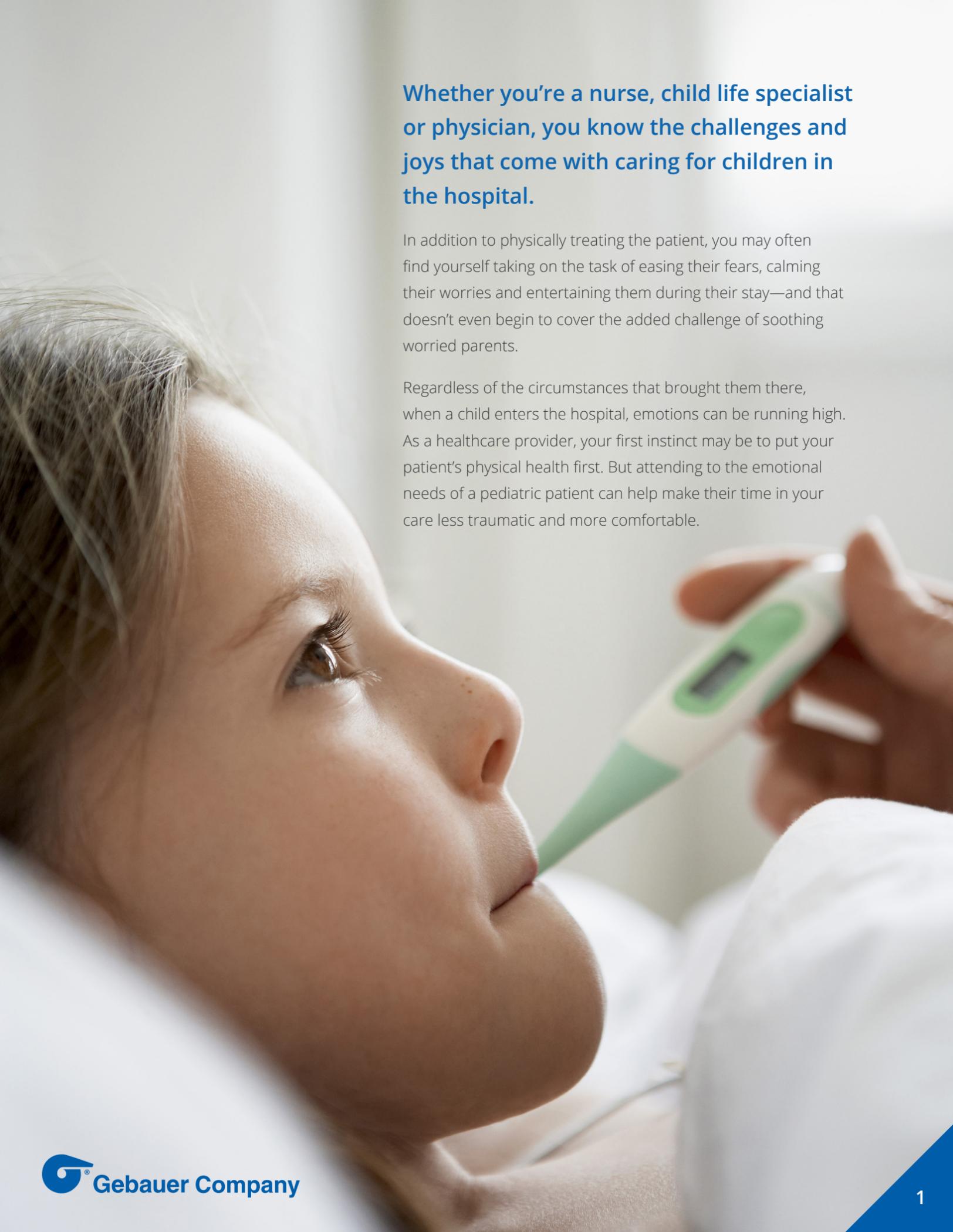
*Young, Sick and Scared:*

# **HOW YOU CAN IMPROVE PEDIATRIC PATIENT COMFORT**

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**Gebauer Company**



**Whether you're a nurse, child life specialist or physician, you know the challenges and joys that come with caring for children in the hospital.**

In addition to physically treating the patient, you may often find yourself taking on the task of easing their fears, calming their worries and entertaining them during their stay—and that doesn't even begin to cover the added challenge of soothing worried parents.

Regardless of the circumstances that brought them there, when a child enters the hospital, emotions can be running high. As a healthcare provider, your first instinct may be to put your patient's physical health first. But attending to the emotional needs of a pediatric patient can help make their time in your care less traumatic and more comfortable.



## Why Pediatric Patient Comfort is Important

No matter how well you care for your patients, no one wants to be in the hospital longer than necessary. By doing what you can to make their time as low-stress and calming as possible, you can make a difference in both their time in the hospital and in their recovery afterward.

These simple yet heroic interactions improve patient and family experiences and could, ultimately, [improve HCAHPS scores](#) for your facility—a huge factor in your hospital's internal processes. A hospital's Medicare reimbursement depends on the satisfaction rate of its patients as measured by the survey. On a more personal level, some hospitals use survey responses as a way of [measuring the effectiveness of their staff](#).

Improving pediatric patient comfort doesn't require a significant shift in how you're already doing your job. Instead, by simply making a few small yet effective changes to your processes, you can help your patients and their families have a better experience marked by reduced stress and fear.

**Your interaction with them  
can be the difference between  
a “good day” and a “bad day.”**

As you face potentially life-altering situations with your pediatric patients, it is helpful to have an arsenal of calming activities and strategies at your disposal. Providing tools and coping mechanisms specifically designed for children shows that your hospital values the unique experience and emotional range of your youngest clientele.

The following are tactics nurses, child life specialists and physicians can employ to combat the anxieties young patients may be feeling while they are in your care.



SITUATIONS AND SOLUTIONS FOR

# IMPROVED PEDIATRIC CARE

It's impossible to predict what scenarios you'll face as you arrive to work each day. The unpredictable nature of your job means you need to constantly be prepared to provide the support and care your patient needs in the moment—often with little preparation or time to plan.

Here are several common situations the children in your care may face, and how you can improve their comfort level with just a few small changes to your approach.

# A New Medical Regimen

Introducing a new medical regimen for a child can be particularly difficult. He or she may not understand why their medication, exercises or therapies are important and they may resist the routine. With the help of a child life specialist and reinforced encouragement from nurses, a behavioral modification program can go a long way toward successful implementation. By approaching the new medical regimen as a new learned behavior, you can help your pediatric patients and their parents feel comfortable and confident with their care moving forward.

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## HOW CHILD LIFE SPECIALISTS CAN HELP

### Therapeutic Play Activities

Often, simply taking the time to make the hospital feel a little more “normal” and home-like can have a calming effect on a pediatric patient. One way of doing this is through play activities that relax the child and help make their recovery as enjoyable as possible. Child life specialists can provide more formalized therapeutic play activities.

For example, a new medical regimen may seem less intimidating to a young patient when it is being explained through the mouth of a puppet or a story in a picture book. By using play activities to put the patient at ease, child life specialists can make even the most frustrating hospital moments feel hopeful and lighthearted.

## HOW NURSES CAN HELP

### Medical Play

Nurses can participate by incorporating play in small and less scheduled ways throughout their young patients' care. Using medical equipment in play activities can help take some of the stigma away from things like bandages, stethoscopes and blood pressure cuffs. Or, if getting used to taking medicine is a challenge for a young patient, nurses can help establish a reward system that makes the new medical regimen seem less daunting. Even something as simple as star stickers on a chart can be exciting.



# Chronic Illness or a New Diagnosis

Knowing they'll have to face an illness for the rest of their lives—or even just the foreseeable future—is a difficult concept to explain to a child. At such a young age, they may struggle to understand the long-term implications of their diagnosis. By presenting their treatment plan in an approachable and simple manner, while giving them and their parents access to support and resources, physicians can help make their diagnosis seem less frightening.

How you educate a child about their diagnosis depends largely on their developmental age and level of understanding. Catering to their individual needs can help make sure they don't feel confused or left out of their own treatment plan.

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## HOW PHYSICIANS CAN HELP

### Approachability

When the patient is a child, it can be tempting for physicians to direct all of their medical communication to the parent or parents. However, taking the extra time to explain what is happening and communicate with the patient in a way that he or she will understand can help make the experience less traumatic. Since many children have a fear of doctors, physicians who remain approachable—especially when explaining a life-changing diagnosis—can help ease those fears.

## HOW CHILD LIFE SPECIALISTS AND NURSES CAN HELP

### Pet Therapy

Depending on hospital regulations and patient preference, a visit from a therapy dog can do wonders to brighten the spirits of a pediatric patient, especially one who just learned of a new diagnosis. Research has shown that petting animals is calming and the presence of a pet in their hospital room is sure to provide at least a momentary distraction from any pain, discomfort or fear your patient may be feeling.

If your hospital doesn't have a [pet therapy program](#) in place, you may consider bringing up the possibility with a hospital administrator. Therapy dogs are typically trained pets of local residents who want to give back to the community and would be more than willing to work with your hospital to visit the pediatric floors.



# HOW A SOCIAL WORKER, CHILD LIFE SPECIALIST OR EDUCATIONAL STAFF MEMBER CAN HELP

## School Transitions

When a family receives a diagnosis of a chronic illness, one of their first thoughts will likely be how this will affect their child's "normal" life. A social worker can provide the necessary support to make sure the child's teachers and school administrators understand the illness and the changing needs of the child. This may involve picking up homework and bringing it to the hospital during the patient's stay or helping make the transition back to school less traumatic when the child is ready.

## Surgeries, Tests or Medical Procedures

Each medical procedure comes with its own unique set of fears and concerns, for both the patient and the parents. Even a simple needle prick can be traumatic for a child. Going the extra mile to provide emotional support and tending to fears and worries shows that you're committed to the care of the patient as a person.

Basic emotional support during tests and procedures and doing what you can to minimize the pain and invasiveness can also help improve the patient's experience. Nurses [can use a topical anesthetic to reduce anxiety before a needle procedure](#). It may seem like a small difference to you, but it can make a world of difference to a scared child.

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## HOW ANYONE CAN HELP

### Pre-Surgery Hospital Tour

The mystery and uncertainty of surgery is often what makes it so intimidating and scary to a pediatric patient. A child life specialist may want to schedule a pre-surgery tour of the hospital and an age-appropriate explanation about what they can expect can make them feel more comfortable. Simply meeting a few nurses and seeing the floor where they'll be can help alleviate any anxiety or misconception about their procedure.





## HOW PHYSICIANS CAN HELP

### Pre-Surgery Teaching

One of the most common questions children ask before getting a medical procedure is, “Will it hurt?” During the pre-surgery teaching, you can also assure patients that medication will keep them from experiencing much pain. Talk to them about anesthesia and show them how an instant topical anesthetic can temporarily control pain.

## HOW NURSES CAN HELP

### Support During Procedures

The personnel a pediatric patient meets during their pre-surgery or procedure preparation tour can quickly establish themselves as familiar faces. Having some of those same people around on the day of a child's procedure can help make them feel more at home in the hospital environment. For nurses, taking the time to smile and offer words of encouragement can help put your patient's mind at ease and make him or her feel more comfortable with what is about to happen.

During your busy workday, it's not always easy to remember the specific anxieties your patients may be going through. Offering support before, during and after a procedure demonstrates a keen attention to their needs.

# Traumatic Accident

When something traumatic—like a car wreck or other accident—involves a child, the emotional treatment is almost as important as the physical treatment. Post-traumatic stress, anger, shame and fear can manifest in many different ways, affecting your patient's mental health long after their physical wounds have healed. Physicians acknowledging the emotional repercussions of trauma and giving patients access to resources and tools to deal with them is one way to help make sure the psychological damage from their accident isn't swept under the rug.

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## HOW CHILD LIFE SPECIALISTS CAN HELP

### Expressive Therapies

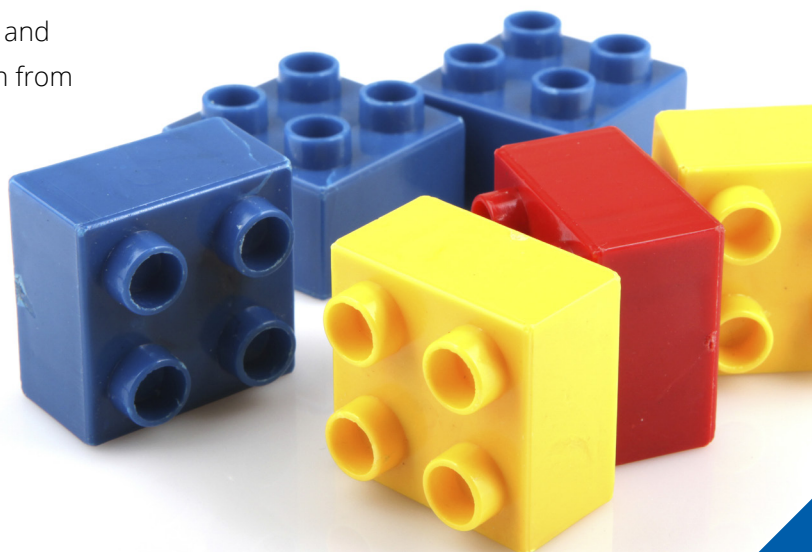
It's not uncommon for younger patients to have difficulty expressing how they're feeling or coping with their diagnosis. Offering opportunities for expressive therapies, like art projects or music therapy, can help children find ways to share their struggles and work through their fears.

Ask patients to draw their body and show you where it hurts on the drawing if they're having trouble explaining their pain. Or practice making up songs together to describe their experience so far in the hospital. These therapy ideas are also great suggestions for parents—who may be feeling helpless and dealing with their own complicated emotions—to do with their children, too.

## HOW NURSES CAN HELP

### Diversional Activities

The reality of a pediatric patient's condition is often sad and stressful. In these cases, diverting the patient's attention from their discomfort is one of the greatest gifts nurses and other healthcare workers can provide. For these occasions, keep toys, games, books, movies, video games or arts and craft supplies on hand to keep children entertained and distracted. Providing these activities can offer momentary relief for your patients and their parents.





## Sibling and Family Support

The schedule of a sick child often means other healthy siblings and family members are also spending lots of time in a hospital or doctor's office. During this time, it's not uncommon for a sibling to become upset or overwhelmed by watching what their brother or sister is going through. You can help take some of the burden off the entire family by showing compassion and support to your patient's support system.

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### HOW CHILD LIFE SPECIALISTS CAN HELP

#### Incorporate Siblings in Therapies

One way to show support for their struggle is to include them in your therapies with your patient. Bring extra art supplies so they can make a drawing as well, or set up a video game console so they can play with their sibling. This can help not only make the sibling feel better, but also make them feel like they are doing something to help their sick brother or sister.

Child life specialists can also take extra time to work with siblings individually and help them understand what's happening. Particularly in the case of a complicated diagnosis, having a professional explain and understand can be especially important.



## PARENTS AND THE PEDIATRIC

# EXPERIENCE

Witnessing their child go through a major medical event or struggle with a chronic illness is difficult for parents. As much as they may be focused on doing what is best for their child, their own stress and concern can be difficult to hide. This visible stress can easily, and inadvertently, negatively affect their child.

By considering the parent experience and taking steps to aid in their peace of mind, healthcare personnel can help create a stronger culture of support for their young patients.



## SUPPORT FOR DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Often, the task to discuss difficult diagnosis details and medical procedures with young patients falls on parents' shoulders. Physicians, nurses, child life specialists and other healthcare personnel can help these conversations be a more positive part of the pediatric experience by counseling parents on the best approach. Preparing parents for these interactions ahead of time can help minimize the anxiety and fear children feel while in the hospital.



## TIPS ON ESTABLISHING A NEW ROUTINE

Though parents are not always present for their child's play therapy session with their child life specialist, any insight the child life specialist gains into how behavioral modification can help establish a new medical regimen should be relayed to the parent. This also applies to nurses who may discover a certain playful approach makes taking medicine or other medical procedures easier on the child.

Consistency will be key in helping the patient adapt to their new routine, so communication between adult caregivers is essential. Since parents will likely be the primary caregivers once the patient leaves the hospital, include them as a valuable team member from the start.



## MANAGING PARENT EMOTIONS

To help parents manage their emotions while in the presence of their child, nurses and child life specialists can work to find time to give parents "breaks" as their schedules allow. For instance, child life specialists can encourage parents to get a cup of coffee while their child is in play therapy or nurses can offer to give parents a small break while they check stats.

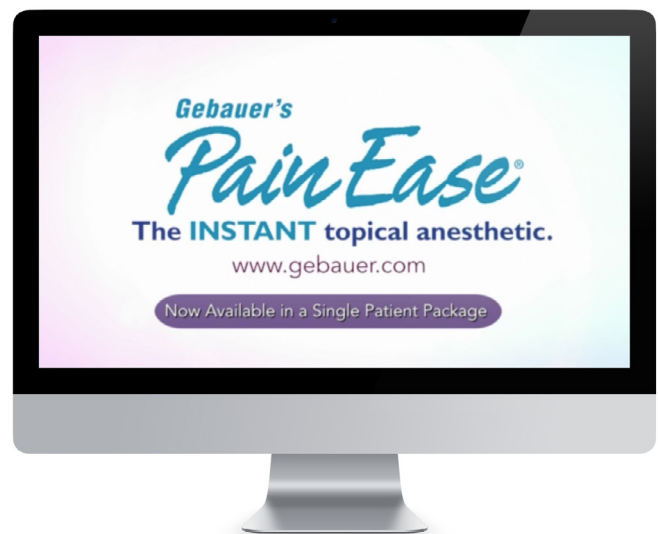
Even if these opportunities are few and far between, parents will appreciate the rare chance to clear their minds; their child's emotional well-being will likely be better for it.

# Put Pediatric Patients on a Path to Healing

The impact of stress and anxiety on physical health is well-documented, but these emotional symptoms often go unnoticed in young patients who aren't sure how to express or advocate for their needs. Having processes and systems in place to increase the comfort level and reduce the fear of pediatric patients can help get them on the path to healing sooner and with less residual trauma. Offering simple patient comfort measures can put children more at ease during their experience.

Learn more about the easy-to-implement patient comfort solution, Gebauer's Pain Ease® an instant topical anesthetic skin refrigerant that helps ease anxiety and make a lasting impact on patients.

Watch this short video ►



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