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**Pediatric Experts Help Families Navigate Difficult Conversations about
Health and Illness during the Holidays**

COLUMBUS, Ohio – During the holiday season, families are more likely to interact with friends and relatives, including loved ones they may not have seen since a child’s medical diagnosis or hospitalization. While conversations about the diagnosis or hospital stays are well meaning, families might not be prepared to have the discussion or answer these personal questions.

“I encourage families to have an open dialogue prior to holiday gatherings about how they might navigate conversations or questions regarding a current or recent medical encounter,” said Sami Rundo, child life specialist at Nationwide Children’s Hospital. “Talk about the various encounters you might have with family and peers, and how you can support one another as a family. Make sure you are on the same page about what you are comfortable sharing and what you want to keep private.”

Experts suggest the following ideas to help families and patients feel more prepared as they head into the holiday season:

- Family discussion – encourage conversations with the immediate family to share feelings regarding previous or current medical experiences/diagnosis. It is all right to set some ground rules for the family discussion; this can help create a safe space for sharing.
- Establishing boundaries – identify what is shareable and what is private through open discussion and exploring feelings. Practice how to decline talking about a topic and how to change the conversation. For example, “I don’t really want to talk about that right now, but thank you for asking. Want to play?”
- Reframing the experience – consider the supportive experiences and strengths of each family member during particularly difficult times.
- Rehearsing responses – practice how you might respond to different questions. It is okay to share different amounts of information based on the relationship. For example, when talking to an acquaintance you could say, “Yes, I was in the hospital, but now I’m doing better. How are you?”
- Exploring coping strategies – if someone feels overwhelmed during gatherings, talk about how and who to signal when they need some support. Bring comfort items with you to holiday functions. These may include a familiar book, stuffed animal, or toys.

“These strategies can help to promote a sense of family cohesion, increase control for the patient, parent and sibling, set the tone heading into gatherings, aid in emotional support, and promote coping

related to a current or previous admissions,” said Gina McDowell, clinical educator for Big Lots Behavioral Health Services at Nationwide Children’s.

“You know what is right for your family and can come up with a plan based on what your family is most comfortable sharing or keeping private,” said McDowell. “It can also be helpful to check in with your child following the holiday event to see how he or she is feeling after such interactions.”

If you know of a family who has had a child recently hospitalized or who is currently experiencing an illness or living with a chronic condition, experts recommend asking open-ended questions and letting the family or patient divulge as little or as much as they are comfortable with. For example, instead of asking the family specific questions regarding a hospitalization or diagnosis, simply offer comfort and ask how you can help support.

Emotional support toys may be another way to show a child with a health need that you are thinking of them this season. Experts from Nationwide Children’s Big Lots Behavioral Health team compiled [a list of toys](#) that help with interactive play, relaxation, expression, and social and emotional development. Examples include blocks and tiles, which aid in interactive play, bubbles, kinetic sand and journals, regulating and relaxation tools, and dolls and figures, which encourage emotional and social development and interactive play.