Orthopaedic Connection

Nursemaid’s Elbow. What?

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Orthopaedic Surgery is replete with many names for conditions that mean nothing to the reader unless there is an explanation given. Raise you hand if you know what Nursemaid’s Elbow is. Hmm, just as I suspected.

I don’t know who coined the term, but here is the description of what it is.

What Is It?

It is an injury to a child’s elbow (age 6 months to 5 years) caused by pulling the arm strongly and suddenly. A ligament in the elbow slips over one of the bones (radial head) causing the bone to partially dislocate (subluxation).

Obviously others besides nursemaids can do this – parents, older siblings, relatives, babysitters. I cringe when I see a child pulled up by the arm at a curb.

Or this one and everyone has seen it – a small child being swung around in a circle with their arms straight out. Lastly if a small child is pulling away from you and you have hold of the hand or wrist – don’t jerk them back toward you!

I guess the injury had to be called something so nursemaids get the blame!

Symptoms

The injury occurs when a child’s outstretched arm is pulled suddenly. Sometimes the person pulling will even hear or even feel a pop in the child’s arm. Then comes the scream and the child will not use the arm and holds it close to the body.

Pain usually subsides, but the ongoing symptom is inability to move the joint.

What happened? (Or what did you just do to the poor kid!!)

An elastic band or ligament holds the two forearm bones together at the elbow. A sudden pull on the arm causes the annular ligament to slip over the radial head and it gets trapped. Rarely is the bone broken. The ligament and bone have slipped out of their normal place.

Treatment

There are certain maneuvers that a physician in the Emergency Department can use to reposition or reduce the joint. Typically the child is very protective of the elbow and won’t let it be manipulated without sedation. An x-ray can tell if there are any broken bones. If the reduction is successful, the child will begin using the arm again. Tylenol is all that is needed for soreness. A sling can be tried for a day or two, but usually the child won’t wear it and that is O.K.

What Else?

To prevent Nursemaid’s elbow –

- Avoid pulling a child’s wrist or hand abruptly.
- Don’t swing a child by their hands or wrists.
- If a child pulls away, hold on to them, but don’t jerk them back.
In small children the elbow ligament is fairly loose. With age the ligament strengthens and children older than five are not usually at risk.

Nursemaid’s elbow (radial head subluxation) is one of the most common pediatric joint injuries in children aged 6 months to 5 years.

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