

Children Are Not Small Adults

Treating young patients is a family affair

by Frederick N. Lukash, MD

After 30 years of medicine and 22 years of plastic surgery, I am comfortable saying that children are not small adults. Their needs and wants are different and their support systems more complex than those of adults. Operate on an adult and you care for an individual; operate on a child and you care for the entire family. The most important goal of surgery on children is to make them look and feel like other children. Whether it is reconstructive craniofacial surgery on an infant or an aesthetic procedure on an adolescent, the goal should be about blending and fitting in.

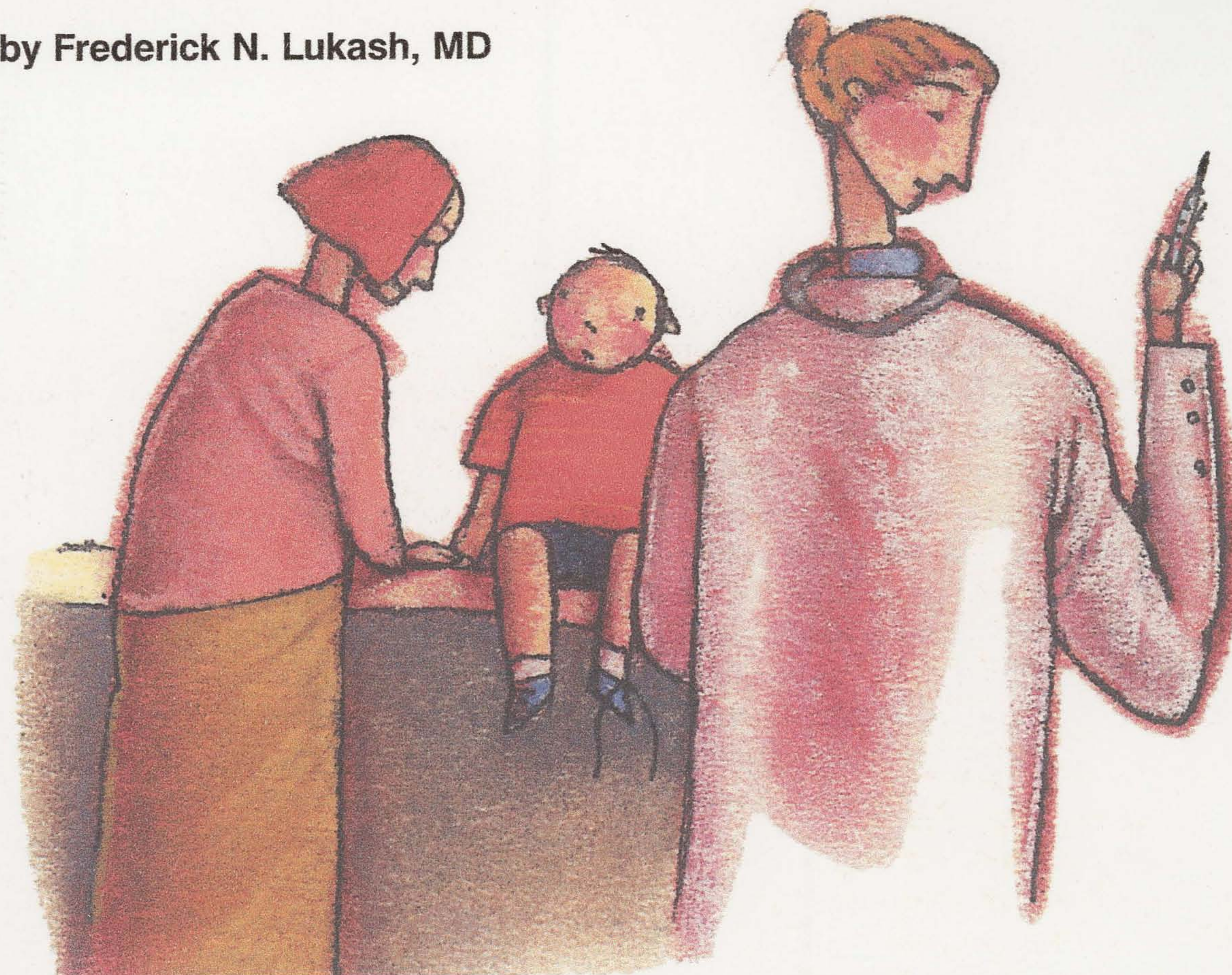
A plastic surgeon who undertakes the care of children and adolescents needs to be a special breed—part psychiatrist and part social worker. These skills will help to win over the patient and the family.

Throughout the process, from initial consultation to postoperative follow-up visits, every decision will feel like a committee vote. As the physician, you must be able to understand the needs of the child and be able to communicate them to anxious and maybe even doubting parents.

I consider pediatric plastic surgery to extend from infancy through childhood and adolescence to the end of college. After that time these patients have enough life experiences to be considered adults in the decision-making process of plastic surgery. Until that milestone has passed, all my consultations involve the family.

Surgery on children is often time-sensitive. Sometimes physiology alone determines when some procedures are to be performed. Other times, the emotional or psychological impact of a surgery being done (or not being done) will determine a procedure's timing and viability.

For example, a structural problem sets the stage that a meningocele will be closed just after birth, a cleft lip at 6 to 12 weeks, a cleft palate at 1 year, and ear reconstructions around age 6. The difficulty in these procedures includes the care of despondent and guilt-ridden parents. They will require almost as much if not more care than the patient undergoing the procedure. Tender loving care all around is the key to guide the patient and family into a sense of normalcy.



As the physician, you are on call 24/7/365 for all their emotional highs and lows.

In other instances, emotional timing becomes the critical issue. This is especially true in the world of school-age children. The drive for acceptance is often in high gear. Perceived flaws can result in issues of self-esteem. The goal here is to determine if the physical flaw is real and whether the emotional angst surrounding the deformity will disappear with its correction. Parent and child may differ on this point. Are prominent ears funny but cute, or do they give the child a complex? Can an adolescent cope with a big nose or large breasts? What about asymmetrical breasts or even underdeveloped breasts—how important are these considerations? A skilled pediatric and adolescent plastic surgeon must know whether surgery or psychiatry or both will repair a “hurting individual.” Clear understandings of self-esteem will also alert one to potential body dysmorphic disorders and anorexia.

I believe in milestone timing. I want children to enter new chapters in their lives feeling complete. Ideally, prominent ears should be repaired prior to the start of school. I want adolescents to go to college feeling good

about themselves. If the procedure is justified and patients are well adjusted, it is most beneficial to have the experience behind them prior to socialization. The first impression should be the true impression.

My love of children has given me a rare gift in surgery. I get to see young people succeed where they might otherwise fail because of societal stereotypes. I get to interact with entire families and become a part of their lives. Also, I get to realize the

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impact of my intervention even decades later as these patients' heightened self-esteem allows them to become productive individuals.

Practitioners who understand that children are not small adults are rewarded with a wonderful and fulfilling career. Those who do not will likely be heading down a path littered with daunting obstacles. ■

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