

When a brother or sister is in the hospital: helping preschool children cope



Patient and Family Education

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

Your child may show behavior changes in response to the illness or treatment of a sibling (a brother or a sister). These changes may result from trying to cope with the stress of having a brother or sister who is ill. As a parent, these changes may worry you.

Below are some behaviors you may see and some tips to help you and your child.

It is common to see changes in your child in these areas:

- Fear of parent leaving (clinging to a parent more)
- Asking for help with things he once did by himself
- Temper tantrums, such as biting, hitting, or kicking
- Bedwetting
- Eating habits
- Sleeping patterns (may have nightmares)
- Jealousy toward the child in the hospital
- Returning to old behaviors, such as thumb sucking, baby talk, or wetting the bed
- Feeling guilty even if he is not to blame for the child's hospital stay

Suggestions for helping your child cope:

- Keep your child's routine as normal as possible.
- Let your child know it is OK to show feelings, and help him find ways to express them in a safe way. If he is angry, give him Play-Doh for pounding, pillows for punching or paper for tearing.
- Let your child know his feelings are normal. Help him use words to describe his feelings by saying, "You look mad," or, "It must be hard not having Mom around."
- Spend time alone with your child. Let him know you miss him and how special he is.
- Talk with your child about the hospital and his sibling. His thoughts could be worse than the truth. Give him simple information that includes his senses (what he sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes).
- Remember to go at your child's pace. It is OK if he is not ready to talk about his sibling and asks to go play instead.
- He may learn best through playing doctor or listening to a story about the hospital.
- Learn what your child knows about his sibling, the hospital, and the changes in the home by asking questions.
- Include him in his sibling's care if he wants to help. Let him visit the hospital, paint something for the hospital room, send pictures or call the hospital each day.
- Offer your child a nightlight or a favorite toy to help him sleep through the night.
- If your child is in daycare, tell his teacher about the ill child so she will be aware of any changes in his behavior and help him with his feelings.
- Remind your child he will be taken care of, even if you are at the hospital.

Remember that even though your child may act differently when his sibling is ill, he is still the same person. These behavior changes are common and typically go away. This is your child's way of trying to deal with the illness and hospital stay.

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.