

When a brother or sister is in the hospital: helping school age 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 and 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:

- Acting out, such as yelling or refusing to help
- Wanting more attention
- Spending less time with friends
- Asking for help with things he once did by himself
- Eating habits
- Sleeping patterns (may have nightmares)
- Avoiding school or having difficulty in school
- Mood swings
- Returning to old behaviors, such as thumb sucking, baby talk, or bed-wetting
- Fear of sounds, places, or things he is not typically afraid of, such as dying, getting sick, being alone, or the dark
- 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 the 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 reading 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.
- If possible, let your child know when there will be changes, and keep him updated about the ill child's care.

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

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- Offer your child a nightlight or favorite toy to help him sleep through the night.
- Tell your child's teachers about what is going on at home, so they will be aware of possible changes in his mood, behavior or grades.
- Keep the child connected to their sibling while in the hospital. You can do this through phone calls, video chats, cards and pictures.

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

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