

When a Brother or Sister is in the Hospital: Helping Infants and Toddlers 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:

- Fear of strangers
- Eating habits
- Toilet training
- Sleeping patterns
- Temper tantrums
- Fear of parent leaving
- Seeking parent support by crying or clinging

Suggestions for helping your child cope:

- Keep your child's routine as normal as possible.
- Provide security objects, such as a pacifier, blanket, or stuffed animal.
- Help your child express his feelings through play with such things as Play-Doh, pots and pans (for banging), finger paint, and water play.
- When leaving, tell him where you are going and when you will be back.
- To help your child with your absence, leave an item of yours, such as a picture or shirt for him to keep until you return.
- Spend time alone with your child. Let him know you miss him and how special he is.
- Even though your child may not understand the meaning of the illness, he can sense your feelings and concerns. His thoughts could be worse than the truth. Give him simple information that includes his senses (what he sees, hears, feels, smells or tastes).
- He may learn best through playing doctor or listening to a story about 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.