

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



Your child may show behavior changes when their sibling (brother or sister) is sick. These changes may happen from trying to cope. As a parent, these changes may worry you. There are some things you can do to help.

Common changes you may see in your child

- Acts out, such as yells or refuses to help
- Wants more attention
- Spends less time with friends
- Asks for help with things they once did by themselves
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes to sleeping (may have nightmares)
- Avoids school or has trouble in school
- Has mood swings
- Returns to old behaviors (such as thumb sucking, baby talk or bedwetting)
- Has a fear of sounds, places or things they most often are not scared of (such as dying, getting sick, being alone or being in the dark)
- Feels guilty, even if they are not to blame for their sibling's hospital stay

How to help your child cope

- Keep your child's routine as normal as possible.
- Let your child know it is OK to show feelings. Help them find ways to express their feelings in a safe way. If they are angry, give them:
 - Play-Doh to pound
 - Pillows to punch
 - Paper to tear
- Let your child know their feelings are normal. Help them use words to describe their feelings. You could say, "You look mad," or, "It must be hard not having Mom around."
- Spend time alone with your child. Let them know you miss them and how special they are.
- Talk with your child about their sibling and the hospital. Their thoughts could be worse than the truth. Give simple information that includes their senses – what they see, hear, feel, smell or taste.
- Remember to go at your child's pace. It is OK if they are not ready to talk about their sibling and ask to go play instead.
- They may learn best through playing doctor or reading a story about the hospital.
- Ask questions. Learn what they know about their sibling, the hospital and the changes at home.

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

When a brother or sister is in the hospital, continued

- Include them in their sibling's care if they want to help. Let them:
 - Visit the hospital.
 - Paint something for the hospital room.
 - Send pictures.
 - Call the hospital each day.
- If possible, let your child know when there will be changes. Update them about their sibling's care.
- Offer your child a nightlight or favorite toy to help them sleep through the night.
- Tell your child's teachers about what is going on at home. This is so they will be aware of possible changes in your child's mood, behavior or grades.
- Keep them connected to their sibling during the hospital stay. You can do this through phone calls, video chats, cards and pictures.

Remember: Your child is still the same person even though they may act differently when their sibling is sick. These behaviors are common and most often go away. This is your child's way of trying to deal with their sibling's sickness and hospital stay.

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.

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