Let's Talk About...

Caring for well siblings

The whole family is affected when a child is ill or injured. A sick child often gets more attention, special treatment, and gifts. Healthy children may feel cheated and think that being healthy isn't as valuable as being sick. The following are feelings that healthy siblings may have and suggestions to support your healthy children.

Common experiences of siblings

- **Guilt.** Some children blame themselves for their sibling's problems. They feel they should have protected their sick sibling from injury or illness. Younger children may believe they caused their sibling to get sick or hurt by saying or wishing bad things in a moment of anger. Children may feel guilty that they escaped illness or injury and their sibling didn't.
- **Jealousy.** Because ill or injured children have added needs, their siblings may start to feel unwanted or unneeded. They may resent the attention given to their sibling. The well sibling's behavior may reflect how they feel. Some children may "act out" these feelings while others may become less social.
- **Embarrassment.** Siblings may feel embarrassed because of how the sick child looks or acts. They may wonder what their friends will think, and may not want to have friends over. They may not want to spend time with their sibling as they have in the past.
- **Loneliness.** Siblings may feel lonely because their parents and the sick child are not around as often as they would like. They may also feel lonely because they missed chances to play with their friends.
- **Worry.** Some younger siblings may be afraid of "catching" what the sick child has. Older children may worry that a child they have in the future will have the sick child's condition. Distress about present or future responsibilities for their sibling is also common.
- **Pressure.** Sometimes siblings feel pressure to do extra work around the house or at school, so there is no extra stress on the parents. Without realizing it, parents sometimes place pressure on their children to excel.
- **Grief or sadness.** Siblings may be sad or grieve as a normal part of dealing with life changes within the family.
- **Resentment.** Siblings may feel resentment because of more responsibilities at home. Financial limits on the family because of their sick child may cause resentment, also.
- **School difficulties**. Some siblings of sick children have a hard time concentrating in school. They may feel different or isolated from peers at school.

What can you do to support your healthy children?

1. Be open and honest with them. Tell them what is happening at the hospital and how you feel. Children learn from adult example. They need to know that it is okay to feel scared, sad or unsure. Try not to depend on your children for emotional support. Give your children permission to express feelings of guilt, jealousy, anger, sadness, fear and love. These are all okay feelings.
2. Schedule family conferences and give siblings the chance to ask questions and express their feelings.
3. Give your children your time, not gifts. This can happen either by phone, visits to the hospital or extra time when at home. Set up

specific times to spend with your children at home. Try going to the park, out for ice cream or for a bike ride.

4. If possible, give your well children a chance to visit their sibling. Help them understand what happens at the hospital. Visiting can help children see some of the difficult situations with which the ill child has to deal.
   - It is important to give your well children the choice to visit or not.
   - Respect your well children's need to be in and out of your sick child's room.
   - Child life specialists can help your well children understand what happens at the hospital through orientation and medical play.
   - Keep the visit fairly brief. A hospital is not an easy place for well children to visit.
5. Help your well children stay in contact with your sick child through pictures, photos, notes, tapes and phone calls.
6. Continue daily routines in the home as much as possible. Try to keep a normal schedule for bed times, school, lessons and homework.
7. If possible, prepare siblings for any household changes before they happen. For example, let them know if your sick child is coming home with medical equipment.
8. Reassure your children that just because their sibling is sick, they won't be sick too.
9. Keep school teachers informed so they may be sensitive and understanding about your well children's feelings and concerns about their sibling in the hospital.
10. Balance the care of all children between family and friends. This will keep you from getting too burdened with all the responsibility.
11. If needed, practice answering questions about your sick child to help your well children feel comfortable. For example, show them how to answer the question: "How is your sister doing?"
12. Stress the healthy aspects of your sick child, such as her sense of humor, interests and what gives her pleasure.
13. Be careful not to burden your well children with extra duties. Tell them you understand it may be difficult for them. Thank them for their efforts to help.
14. Recognize independence is important for children, especially adolescents. For example, allow them to go to a party instead of doing other responsibilities. Ask them what they want to do at home to help out.

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