

## Caring for Well Siblings

When a child is sick or hurt, the whole family is affected. This can be hard at times on the siblings of the sick child (the brothers, sisters, and other children living in the home). Well siblings may not understand what's happening or how to deal with their feelings. It can also be hard for parents to know how to help well siblings. Here are some ways you can support your entire family during a sickness or injury.

### Prepare your well child for visiting the hospital

To help your other children prepare for a visit to the hospital:

- Take a picture of your sick child at the hospital.
- Ask your child if they would like to see the picture. If so, show them. If not, let them know you will have it whenever they want to look at it.
- Talk to your child about what they see in the picture and what they might see at the hospital, such as tubes, machines, cribs, or beds.
- Teach your child what the things they see in the picture are for. For example, the tube is for food or breathing or the machine tells the doctors and nurses how the sick child's body is doing.
- If possible, give your child a chance to visit their sibling, but remember that it is important to let them choose whether or not to visit. Either way, help them understand what happens at the hospital.
- Remember that your well child might feel overwhelmed while visiting and need to take a break. Respect their need to leave the room.



### Other things you can do to support your well child

Talk with your child and others:

- Be open and honest as you prepare your child for the hospital and when you answer their questions. It is okay to say "I don't know," when you don't know the answer.
- Talk to the well sibling about what you do know about your sick child or baby. For example, why they are in the hospital and how long they may be there.
- Keep them updated on what is happening at the hospital.
- Tell your well child how you feel. They need to know that it is okay to feel scared, sad, or unsure.

- Practice answering questions with your well child about their sick sibling. This can help your well child feel more comfortable talking to others. For example, help them answer the question: “How is your sister doing?”
- Schedule family meetings and give the sibling a chance to ask questions and express their feelings.
- Reassure your well child that they will not get what their sibling has if they can't catch it and it doesn't run in your family.
- Pay attention when you talk on the phone around your well child. They will hear your side of the conversation but not the other side. They might be confused by what they hear.
- Let your well child's teachers know about the sick sibling. This will help teachers be sensitive and understanding about feelings and concerns your well child may have.

Be as consistent as possible:

- Stick with your daily routines at home. Try to keep a normal schedule for bedtimes, school, lessons, and homework.
- Follow your family rules. It is important to be flexible, but children also need to know what you expect of them.
- Ask family and friends for help caring for your well child. As much as possible, choose caregivers who can consistently support your child when you need to be away.



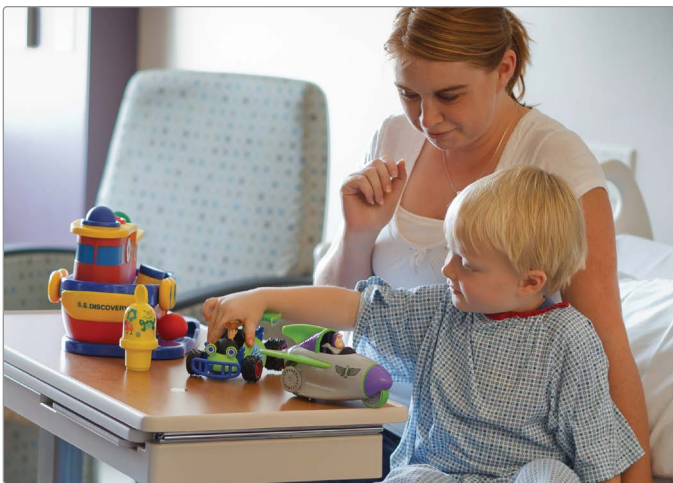
Build a connection between home and hospital:

- Talk to your well child about how their sibling misses them and is excited to meet or see them.
- Send home items from the sick child, such as footprints, letters, a photo, or a small gift.
- Help your well child create items or ask them to choose items to leave with your sick child or baby at the hospital, such as letters, drawings, toys, books, or a blanket.
- Use Skype or FaceTime so the siblings can see and talk to each other.

Help the well child cope in appropriate ways:

- Young children may not have the words to express their feelings, so they may act out instead.
- Teach your well child ways to cope with their feelings.
  - It's okay for your child to kick a ball, scream in a pillow, stomp on bubble wrap, smash play-doh, knock down blocks, crash cars, or draw pictures.
  - Encourage older children to write in a journal, talk to a friend or caregiver they trust, or use art, music, or sports to help them cope.





## Common feelings of children with a sick sibling

The well child may have different feelings while their sibling is in the hospital, such as guilt, jealousy, anger, sadness, fear, and love. All feelings are okay.

- **Guilt.** Some children blame themselves for their sibling's sickness. They may feel they should have protected their sibling from getting sick or hurt. Younger children might think they made their sibling get sick or hurt by saying or wishing bad things when feeling angry. Children may feel guilty that their sibling got sick or hurt and they didn't.
- **Jealousy.** Because sick children have extra needs, their siblings may feel unwanted or unneeded. They may resent the attention their sibling gets. Some children may act out these feelings, while others may become quiet or withdrawn.
- **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. Some children may worry about taking care of a sick sibling, now or in the future.
- **Pressure.** Sometimes siblings feel pressure to do extra work around the house to help their parents or do well in school so parents won't worry about them. Without realizing it, parents sometimes place pressure on their children.
- **Grief or sadness.** Siblings may be sad or grieve as a normal part of dealing with changes in the family.
- **Resentment.** Siblings may feel resentment because of more responsibilities at home or a lack of money because of medical costs. They may feel cheated and think that in some ways it is better to be sick than healthy.
- **School difficulties.** Some siblings of sick children have a hard time paying attention in school. They may feel different or isolated from other kids at school.





## Child-life specialists are here to support your well child, too

Child-life specialists can help your well child by:

- Telling them why their brother or sister is in the hospital and what they need to get better. This can help your well child feel less worried or scared.
- Meeting their social and emotional needs through play.
- Showing them ways to support their sick sibling when they visit, such as:
  - Playing
  - Singing a song
  - Talking to their sibling
  - Holding their hand
  - Reading a story
  - Drawing a picture



## Helping your well child adjust to a new baby at home

- Teach the well sibling about any medical equipment their new sibling may have when they come home. Explain how the equipment works and what they can touch.
- Tell your older child how they can touch, play with, and take care of the new baby.
- Teach the sibling to wash their hands before touching the baby.
- Let the sibling help you care for the new baby. They can:
  - Pick out outfits or blankets.
  - Help push a stroller.
  - Help with bath time, diaper changes, and feeding time.
- Try side-by-side caregiving. While you care for the baby, well children can feed, dress, and rock to sleep a stuffed animal or doll.