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. Siblings of a child in the hospital can find this difficult at times. It can also be challenging for parents to know how to help well siblings. Here are some ways parents can help support siblings of a sick child.

Prepare your well child for the hospital experience

• Take a picture of your sick child at the hospital. Ask your well child if they would like to see it. If so, show the picture to the sibling.

• Talk to your well child about what they see in the picture and what they might see at the hospital (bed, crib, tubes, and machines). If they are not ready to see the photo, let them know you will have the photo available whenever they want to look at it.

• Teach your well child the purpose of the tubes or machines. For example, the tube is for food or for breathing or the machine tells the doctor how your sibling’s body is doing.

• If possible, give your well child a chance to visit their sibling. It is important to give them the choice of whether or not to visit. Either way, help them understand what happens at the hospital.

  – Prepare your well child by helping them to know what they will see, hear, feel, smell, etc. when they visit their sick sibling.

• Respect your well child’s need to go in and out of your sick child’s room.

Child life specialists are here to support your well child

Child life specialists can help support your well child by:

• Explaining the healthcare needs of their brother or sister.

  – This may help to decrease the stress and anxiety related to having a sibling in the hospital.

• Helping them feel important and address their social and emotional needs through play.

• Showing them what they can do to support their sick sibling when they visit the hospital.

  – For example, sing a song, talk to their sibling, hold their hand, read a story, or draw a picture.

What can you do to support your well child?

Talk with your well child and others

• Be open and honest as you prepare your well child for the hospital and as you answer their questions. It is okay to say “I don’t know,” when you don’t know the answer.
• Talk to the sibling about what you do know about your sick child or baby. For example, why they are in the hospital and how long they will 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 to help them feel comfortable. For example, help them answer the question: “How is your sister doing?”

• Schedule family meetings and give the sibling the chance to ask questions and express their feelings.

• Reassure your child that they will not get what their sibling has if it isn’t contagious or hereditary.

• Keep the sibling’s school teachers informed about your sick child. This will help the teachers be sensitive and understanding about feelings and concerns your well child may have about their sibling in the hospital.

Be consistent as much as possible

• Continue daily routines in the home, as much as possible. Try to keep a normal schedule for bed times, school, lessons, and homework.

• Maintain rules. It is important to be flexible, however, children also need to know that expectations have remained the same.

• Balance the care of all your children between family and friends. As much as possible, choose caregivers who can consistently support your child when you need to be away.

• Have caregivers use the same words that you use to explain why your child or baby is at the hospital.

• Give your well child your time. This can happen either by phone calls, visits to the hospital, or extra time at home. Set up specific times to spend with your child at home. Try going to the park, out for ice cream, or for a bike ride.

• Prepare your well children for any household changes before they happen, if possible. For example, let them know if your sick child is coming home with medical equipment.

• 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.

Encourage 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 ill child. For example: footprints, letters, picture, 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. For example: letters, drawings, toys, books, or a blanket.
Help the well child cope in appropriate ways

- Young children may not have the words to express their feelings, so they may use behaviors instead. Teach appropriate coping behaviors.
  - It is okay for your child to kick a ball, scream in a pillow, stomp on bubble wrap, smash play-doh, knock down blocks, crash cars, draw pictures, or throw paper airplanes.
  - Encourage older children to write in a journal, talk to a trusted friend or caregiver, or use art, music, or sports to cope.

Common experiences of siblings of a sick child

Healthy children may feel cheated and think that being healthy isn’t as valuable as being sick. The well child may experience a variety of feelings throughout their sibling’s hospitalization. Give your child permission to express feelings of guilt, jealousy, anger, sadness, fear, and love. All feelings are okay.

- **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. Resentment may also be caused by financial limits that are effected by medical costs.

• **School difficulties**—Some siblings of sick children have a hard time concentrating in school. They may feel different or isolated from peers.

**How can I help my 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.

• Suggest ways they can interact with their sick sibling.

• Teach the sibling to wash their hands before touching the sick child or baby.

• Involve the sibling in caregiving. They can:
  – Pick out outfits or blankets.
  – Help push a stroller.
  – Help with bath time, diaper changes, and feeding time.

• Encourage parallel caregiving. While you care for the baby, well children can:
  – Feed, clothe, and rock to sleep a stuffed animal or doll.