

When a brother or sister is in the hospital: helping preschoolers 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

- Fear of you leaving (clinging to you more)
- Asks for help with things they once did by themselves
- Temper tantrums (such as biting, hitting or kicking)
- Bedwetting
- Changes in eating habits
- Changes to sleeping (may have nightmares)
- Jealous of their sibling in the hospital
- Returns to old behaviors (such as thumb sucking, baby talk or wetting the bed)
- 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 to 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.
- Remind your child they did not do anything to cause their sibling's sickness or hospital stay.
- 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 listening to a story about the hospital.
- Ask your child questions. Learn what your child knows about their sibling, the hospital and the changes in the 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.
- Offer your child a nightlight or favorite toy to help them sleep through the night.
- If your child goes to daycare, tell their teacher about their sibling. This is so the teacher is aware of any behavior changes and can help your child with their feelings.
- Remind your child that someone will take care of them, even if you are at the hospital.

Remember: Your child is still the same person even though they may act differently when their sibling is sick. These behavior changes 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.

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