

When a brother or sister is in the hospital: helping babies and toddlers 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, this may worry you. There are some things you can do to help.

Common changes you may see in your child

- Scared of strangers
- Changes to eating habits
- Changes to toilet training
- Changes to sleeping
- Temper tantrums
- Scared of you leaving
- Looks for your support by crying or clinging

How to help your child cope

- Keep your child's routine as normal as possible. This lets your child feel secure and safe in their environment.
- Provide security objects, such as a pacifier, blanket or stuffed animal.
- Help your child express their feelings through play. They could use:
 - Play-Doh
 - Pots and pans (to bang)
 - Finger paint
 - Water play
- Tell them where you are going and when you will be back before you leave.
- Leave something of yours for them to keep, such as a picture or shirt, until you return home.
- Spend time alone with your child. Let them know you miss them and how special they are.
- Your child may not understand the meaning of their sibling's sickness. They can still sense your feelings and concerns. Their thoughts could be worse than the truth. Give simple information that includes their senses – what they see, hear, feel, smell or taste.
- They may learn best through playing doctor or listening to a story about the hospital.
- If your child is staying with someone else, make sure it is someone the child knows well to decrease stranger anxiety.

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.