

# When a brother or sister is in the hospital: helping school age children cope

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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

- Wants to talk about their sibling all the time or does not want to talk about their sibling at all
- Acts out, such as yells or refuses to help
- Wants more attention
- Spends less time with friends
- Asks for help with things they once did by themselves
- Changes to eating or sleeping habits
- Avoids school or has trouble in school
- Has mood swings
- Returns to old behaviors (such as thumb sucking, baby talk or wetting the bed)
- Has a fear of sounds, places or things they most often are not scared of (such as dying, getting sick, being alone or being in the dark)
- Feels guilty, even if they are not to blame for their sibling's hospital stay
- Has trouble concentrating on tasks

## How to help your child cope

- Keep your child's routine and environment as normal as possible.
- Share some of your own feelings when appropriate. Let your child know their feelings, like anger, sadness or jealousy, are normal. Help them use words to describe their feelings.
- Help them find ways to express their feelings in a safe way. If they are angry, encourage physical activities like running, jumping or dancing, or give them Play-Doh to squeeze or pillows to punch.
- Spend time alone with your child. Let them know you miss and love them. Give them hugs and comfort.
- 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.
- 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 reading a story about the hospital.
- Make it clear that no one is to blame for their sibling's illness. Young children can blame themselves, and they need to know nothing is their fault.
- Ask questions. Learn what they know about their sibling, the hospital and the changes at home.
- Give them the option to be included in their sibling's care. Let them:
  - Visit the hospital.

**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

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- Paint something for the hospital room or pack items from home.
- Send pictures.
- Call, send text messages or video chat with their sibling.
- If possible, let your child know when there will be changes. Update them about their sibling's care.
- Offer your child a nightlight or favorite toy to help them sleep through the night.
- Tell your child's teachers or school counselors about what is going on in your family. This is so they will be aware of possible changes in your child's mood, behavior or grades and help your child manage emotions.

**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.**

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