

# Child life services in the NICU

Certified Child Life Specialists (CCLS) provide support for babies and their families in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). As part of the care team, CCLS help ease the stress of being in the hospital and provide support to siblings, parents, caregivers and other loved ones through emotional and developmental support, education and resources.

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## Certified Child Life Specialists can help with:

- Finding ways to help your baby's development in the NICU. CCLS can share educational resources, organize family events and engage in bedside discussions about parent-baby bonding opportunities.
- Giving you ways to make memories with your baby. CCLS can record developmental milestones through scrapbooking, molds and footprints. They can also take photos of the baby's "firsts" (such as first skin-to-skin contact, first bath).
- Creating play-based activities that promote healthy growth and development. This offers a nurturing and supportive environment for both the baby and you.
- Communicating with siblings about the baby's medical needs using age-appropriate language. This includes:
  - Explaining medical equipment that supports your baby's growth and strength
  - Making emotional connections between your baby and their siblings at home

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To make an appointment with the NICU child life specialist, please email Kia Ferrer at [kia.ferrer@nm.org](mailto:kia.ferrer@nm.org) or call 312.472.3160 (TTY: 711).

# Supporting NICU siblings

It is common for siblings of babies in the NICU to have difficulty with the stress and change in their lives. During a NICU hospitalization, siblings often face different challenges, including:

- Separation from their parents
- Changes in their routine
- Worry about what is going on with the baby
- Feeling upset about not being able to see their baby sibling in person
- Concern about parents' feelings

One of the most common ways children and teenagers show that they are stressed or having difficulty coping is by changing their behavior. They might become more withdrawn or act out. They might have difficulty in school or start acting younger than they are. If you or one of your child's teachers or caregivers notices changes like this, you may wonder how you can best support your child.

To support a sibling when a baby is in the NICU, it is key to keep them involved, maintain routines and address their feelings. Involve them by letting them participate in age-appropriate tasks, like choosing clothes or creating art for the baby's space. Maintain familiar routines to provide stability and reassure them that things will be OK. Openly communicate, answer their questions honestly and validate their emotions.

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The following pages offer examples for age-appropriate support for siblings. If you have questions, make an appointment with the NICU child life specialist by emailing [Kia Ferrer at \[kia.ferrer@nm.org\]\(mailto:kia.ferrer@nm.org\)](mailto:kia.ferrer@nm.org) or calling 312.472.3160.

# Youngest NICU siblings (ages 1-3 years)

Many families assume that very young children cannot understand what is happening. Because of this, they do not talk with their children about their baby's NICU hospitalization.

A toddler cannot understand most medical information. But they may understand more than you expect about what your family is going through. They will need your support to cope well.

Toddlers are excellent at sensing when parents feel upset or anxious. This can cause them stress and worry. Because they have limited language, toddlers use behavior to express how they are feeling.

You may notice more tantrums or crying. Or, you might notice your toddler acting younger than they are. They might start using "baby talk," waking more during the night or wetting their pants (for a toilet-trained child). These can all be signs that your toddler is having a difficult time coping.

- **Use very simple language to talk to your toddler about what is going on.** "Our baby was born, but he is tiny and sick. The doctors need to take care of him in the hospital until he grows and gets better. Let's look at this picture of our baby together." Consider reading books about the NICU or about having a new baby to help your toddler understand what is going on.
- **Talk about feelings and help your toddler label them.** "Daddy is feeling a little sad because our baby is in the hospital and not at home with us. It's OK to feel sad sometimes. I will feel happy again." Or, "I see that you are feeling angry. Maybe a hug will help you calm down." Provide gentle reassurance and loving support to your toddler to help them feel safe: "We love you so much. You are so special."

- **Avoid introducing any new developmental tasks.** This includes switching to a new bed, toilet training or weaning from bottles or breasts.

## Handling separation anxiety

Younger children often have great difficulty with being separated from parents during a NICU hospitalization. You may notice your toddler becoming clingier or crying more when you leave to go to the hospital. It is hard for toddlers and preschoolers to understand time. They may feel that they have no idea if or when you will return.

- **Reassure your child that you will always return.** Tell your child when you will return instead of sneaking out while they are distracted: "Mommy must go to the hospital for a while to feed our baby. You can keep playing with grandma now. I will come back when it is time for dinner." If your child has more distress when you need to leave, try providing an explanation a few minutes earlier. Then, get your child interested in an activity with the caregiver before leaving.
- **Try to keep familiar routines in place.** Provide consistent caregivers that your child is familiar with. Tell any caregivers about your toddler's daily routine and preferences in detail.
- **Keep in touch.** If you are away from home for a long period, contact your child often. For example, try calling to read bedtime stories or create a photo book to keep with them. Include pictures of parents, siblings and the new baby.
- **Spend special one-on-one time with your child.** This can reassure them that you still love and value them. This can be as simple as playing outside or going out for a treat.

# Resources

Members of your family and your personal support team may seek additional information, both for themselves and when helping NICU siblings. The books, television shows and videos listed in this section are simply a start. You can ask your CCLS and care team if they have recommendations.

## Books

- ***Waiting for Baby: A Sibling Visits the NICU*** by Jennifer Bracci is a picture book designed to help young children understand and cope with having a sibling in the NICU. It aims to make the NICU experience less overwhelming for siblings by sharing a relatable story. This book is intended for children ages 4 to 8.
- ***The Big Sibling Guide to the NICU: Adventures in Child Life*** by Diane Morales is a workbook designed to help support older siblings who have a newborn sibling in the NICU. This guide is crafted to help young people understand the NICU environment, process their feelings and find ways to bond with their new siblings. This book is intended for children ages 3 to 12.
- ***Cradles of Courage: Adventures in the NICU*** by Brittany Thrift is a children's book written by a pediatric nurse. This book is intended for children ages 3 to 12.
- ***Little Miss, Big Sis*** by Amy Krause Rosenthal is a picture book for children expecting a new sibling. This book is not specific to the NICU experience, but Little Miss learns about becoming a big sister as she and her family celebrate the arrival of a new baby. This book is intended for children ages 0 to 8.
- ***Babies Don't Eat Pizza: A Big Kids' Book About Baby Brothers and Baby Sisters*** by Dianne Danzig has kid-friendly humor and honesty. It covers waiting for the baby and life with baby, from birth through toddlerhood. The story is not specific to the NICU but does mention that some babies need to stay in an incubator if they are small or sick. This book is intended for children ages 4 to 8.

# Videos

- **“Early Baby”** is an episode from the first season of Bluey (episode 40), where the children’s play is disrupted when Indy’s “early baby” game of delivering babies at a hospital collides with Rusty’s knights and dragons game. The episode explores themes of bravery and understanding, showing how different games can connect and how children cope with challenging situations like premature birth.
- **“Big Brother Daniel”** is an episode from Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood. The Tiger Family is expanding, and Daniel finds out that he is going to be a big brother. At first, he isn’t sure what to expect, but as his family prepares for the arrival of the new baby, Daniel learns about what it means to be a big brother... and a big helper, too.
- **“Evie Pig’s Arrival”** is an episode from Peppa Pig. Peppa and Mummy Pig tell the story of Evie’s birth to all their friends. But Peppa’s story is a bit more magical than everyone remembers. Life as a little one is a journey of constant discovery, and full of exciting new experiences.
- **“Welcome Home, Kendi! New Baby Special!”** is an episode from Cocomelon. Cody’s going to be a big brother! Celebrate with Cody and family as they welcome home his baby sister Kendi.



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