

# 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 They might become more withdrawn or act out.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) or calling 312.472.3160.

# School-age NICU siblings (ages 4-11 years)

Young children will immediately notice when parents are feeling upset or anxious. They may also overhear adult conversations about babies and draw incorrect conclusions.

Children this age may secretly believe that something they did, thought or said previously has somehow made the baby get sick or caused their parents to be upset.

For example, they might believe that misbehaving at school is what makes their parents cry. They may think that wishing that they were not having a sibling caused the baby to get sick. They may be worried that they could also become sick and must stay in the NICU. They might view hospitalization as punishment.

Young children often use behavior to express big feelings that they do not know how to share. You may notice more tantrums or crying, changes in appetite or play, acting out, misbehaving, regressing to baby talk or wetting the bed.



- **Pay attention during playtime.** Observe your child's pretend play or play with them. Children this age often act out things that are on their mind. You might learn about any questions your child has about what is going on. You also might learn more about their feelings.
- **Be patient.** Try not to become angry or shame children for regression, "acting like a baby," or having accidents. These are usually temporary responses to stress. They can help you see that your child is having trouble coping. Provide love, reassurance and positive reinforcement when your child displays positive behavior. Your child needs your calm support and understanding.
- **Give your child extra attention.** If your child seems to be acting out or misbehaving, it may be a sign that they need more attention. Avoid punishment for this type of behavior. Punishment can be a form of attention that the child has succeeded in getting. However, it is unhelpful to cope. Instead, praise positive behaviors and try to provide extra attentiveness when you are with your child.
- **Talk to other caregivers.** Share information about what your family is going through with teachers and caregivers. This way, they can respond compassionately. They can also inform you about how your child is doing while you are away.

- **Be honest.** Talk to your child about what is going on and use simple, accurate and honest language. "Our baby was born, but he is tiny and sick. He needs the doctors and nurses to take care of him in the hospital while he grows up and gets better. He especially needs help learning how to breathe. Sometimes, babies are just born early. It's not anyone's fault."
- **Read books about the NICU** or about having a new baby to help your child understand what is going on. Talk about the books afterward to clear up any misunderstandings your child might have about what is going on.
- **Reassure your child that no one is upset with them.** Let them know that the baby's hospitalization is not their fault.

# 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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