

## NICU: Helping Siblings Cope

When a baby is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), the entire family can be affected. Here are some tips for helping siblings cope.

### What Siblings Need

*If you have any questions, please ask the Child Life Specialist.*

#### **Routine**

Help siblings maintain their regular routines as much as possible. Providing structure and normal daily activities will help siblings feel safe and supported when separated from parents and family.

#### **Honesty**

Be honest and use simple words they can understand when explaining why their brother/sister is in the hospital. This will help them feel less afraid.

#### **Communication**

Talk to siblings and help them understand what is happening. Allow siblings the chance to express their feelings and ask questions.

### Behaviors to Watch For

It is not uncommon to notice a change in behavior in siblings when their brother/sister is in the hospital. Here are some typical reactions to watch for:

- Guilt—Feeling that they did something to cause their sibling's to be in the hospital.
- Fear—Worrying that they or another loved one will get sick and have to go to the hospital.
- Anger—Being angry about change in routine, separation from parents, less attention.
- Loneliness—Feeling lonely when parents visit their brother/sister without them and wondering why they're not getting as much attention as usual.
- Confusion—Feeling confused about what will happen to their brother/sister, why they are there and when their life will return to "normal."

These feelings may be expressed in your child's behavior. Watch for:

- Aggressive play or behavior
- Increased need for attention/clinginess
- Returning to younger behavior (bed wetting, temper tantrums, thumb sucking)
- Changes in routine (sleeping and eating patterns)

## How You Can Help

Siblings need lots of love and support when their brother or sister is in the NICU. Try to include your children as much as possible to answer questions and decrease fears.

Here are some resources and activities to use with siblings while supporting them.

## Activities to Promote Positive Coping

- Before visiting the hospital, make sure siblings know what to expect and remind them that it's okay to ask questions.
- Have the sibling choose a special item to bring to their sibling in the hospital (such as a favorite teddy bear, blanket or book).
- Draw pictures or make decorations for the baby's room (at home or in the NICU).
- Write a letter to take to the baby.
- Have the child draw a picture that they would like to share with their sibling.
- Display a chart with different emotions or feelings on it in your home (you and your child can choose where to hang it). Ask the child each day how they are feeling and talk to them about why they are feeling that way. Always let them know that it is okay to talk and express all types of feelings.

## Books You Can Read Together

- “No Bigger Than A Teddy Bear” by Valerie Pankow  
A book for 3 to 7 year olds about what it is like to have a sibling in the NICU.
- “My Brother is a Premie” or “My Sister is a Premie” by Joseph Vitterito  
A book for 3 to 7 year olds that discusses what it is like to have a premature sibling in the NICU.
- “What About Me? When Brothers and Sisters Get Sick” by Allan Peterkin  
A book for 5 to 10 year olds with hospitalized siblings.
- “When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness” by Marge Eaton Heegaard  
A workbook for 7 to 13 year olds who have a sibling that is hospitalized or chronically ill.
- “The Kissing Hand” by Audrey Penn  
A book about separation – this book is helpful if siblings are having a difficult time coping with separation from parents while they visit their child in the NICU.
- “In My Heart” by Jo Witek  
A book about emotions.

For more information and support on how to help siblings cope, please contact the Child Life specialist at 312.472.3201.

*Para asistencia en español, por favor llamar al Departamento de Representantes para Pacientes al 312.926.3112.*

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Developed by: NMH Neonatal Intensive Care Unit