

NICU: Helping School Age 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 very young siblings cope:

What Siblings Need

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 feeling 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:

- Anger about getting less attention from their parents
- Feeling guilty that they did something to cause their sibling to be in the hospital
- Feeling lonely when parents are at the hospital visiting with their sibling
- Denial that things have changed or denial in regard to their emotions
- Returning to younger behavior (bed wetting, temper tantrums, thumb sucking)
- Acting out at school or at home
- Complaining of feeling sick such as headaches or stomachaches
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns (due to lack of routine)

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. If possible, make arrangements for a support person to be with the sibling when you are away from home to visit with your baby in the NICU. A grandparent, close relative or friend, can help the sibling feel safe and secure.

Talking with School Age Siblings

Know that this can be an ongoing process. Don't feel like you need to explain everything at once. It will take time for the siblings to learn and understand what is going on.

- Use open-ended questions that are not answered by “yes” or “no.” This will help you to learn what siblings are thinking and what they understand.
- Help siblings to explore their feelings.
- Answer questions simply. Answer one question at a time.
- Acknowledge and validate their feelings. Send the message that “Your feelings make sense.”

Activities to Promote Positive Coping

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

- Allow siblings to visit the baby and include them as much as possible.
- Have the siblings choose a special item to bring to their sibling in the hospital (such as a favorite teddy bear, blanket, or book).
- Help siblings create art, letters, or photos to place at their brother or sister's bedside.
- Create mailboxes for the siblings at home and the baby in the NICU. Allow siblings to leave notes/drawings in the mailbox when they miss their brother or sister and are unable to visit. Caregivers can take the items back and forth with them.

Books You Can Read Together

- “When Something Terrible Happened” by Marge Heegaard
A workbook for children who have a sibling in the hospital with a serious or chronic illness.
- “What About Me? When Brothers and Sisters Get Sick” by Allan Peterkin
A book for children 5 to 10 years old who have a sibling in the hospital.

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

Northwestern Medicine – Health Information Resources

For more information, contact Northwestern Memorial Hospital's Alberto Culver Health Learning Center (HLC) at hlc@nm.org, or by calling 312.926.5465. Health information professionals can help you find the information you need and provide you with personal support at no charge.

For more information about Northwestern Medicine, please visit our website at nm.org.

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