

NICU: Helping Teen 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 or jealousy 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
- Testing their limits and acting more rebellious or impulsive than usual
- Feeling more moody or irritable
- Becoming withdrawn or sad

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.

Talking with Teen 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.

- Be open and honest when you talk with your teen
- Respect their wishes and let them decide how they want to take part in care or when they want to talk.

- 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.
- Acknowledge and validate their feelings. Send the message that “Your feelings make sense.”
- Help siblings to explore their feelings.
- Encourage peer support whenever possible.
- Provide examples of positive coping and be a role model for healthy adult behaviors.
- Allow them to make informed choices.

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.
- Ask siblings to create an art project or sign with information about them or the family to hang at the baby’s bedside.
- Encourage siblings to take part in a therapeutic activity, such as creating a collage or journaling. This may help them express their thoughts and feelings.

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.
- “The Sibling Slam Book: What it’s Really Like to Have a Brother or Sister with Special Needs” by Don Meyer and David Gallagher
A book for teenagers, written by teenagers, to discuss what its really like to have a sibling who’s hospitalized or has special needs and how to cope.

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