

NICU: Helping Toddler and Preschool 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 change in routine, separation from parents, and less attention
- Irritability or acting out more than usual
- Returning to younger behavior (bed wetting, temper tantrums, thumb sucking)
- Clinginess or demanding more attention at times
- Play that seems to reflect what is going on with the family
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns (due to lack of routine)
- Feeling guilty that they did something to cause their sibling to be in the hospital

How You Can Help

Younger 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. Understand that siblings may not understand what is going on- this is okay. Meet siblings where they are at and expect that this will be an ongoing learning process. 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 Younger Siblings

- Give direct and concrete information in a way that they can understand.
- Before visiting the hospital, make sure siblings know what to expect and remind them that it's okay to ask questions.
- Be honest and use language they may hear from others.
- Expect questions to change .
- Expect questions to be repeated – hearing caregivers confirm answers may be comforting .
- Acknowledge and validate their feelings. Send the message that “Your feelings make sense.”
- Model appropriate coping and allow siblings to express feelings of anger, sadness.

Activities to Promote Positive Coping

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

- 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.
- 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.
- “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