

When Brother or Sister Goes to the Hospital Helping Children Cope

When a child is hospitalized, it can be as frightening for brothers and sisters as it is for the patient. They may react in one of many ways.

Finding themselves separated from their parents, the brother or sister may feel abandoned, rejected and angry. They may feel responsible for the illness or feel guilty about having angry thoughts about the hospitalized child. They may be afraid that they, too, will be sent to the hospital. If they've been sent to stay with relatives, finding themselves in an unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar routines could make problems worse.

Siblings react in different ways depending on:

- Their age(s)
- Length of the child's hospital stay
- Seriousness of the hospitalized child's illness or disability
- Amount of time the siblings are separated from their parents
- Quality of explanations and answers to the siblings' questions about hospitalization
- Attention that is given to the siblings' feelings
- Nature of past experiences with hospitals
- Nature of past experiences of separation from parents

What to Expect

Children may:

- Eat or talk less
- Act withdrawn
- Act in a way that gets more attention
- React with emotional or angry outbursts if they are fearful or feel left-out
- Return to behaviors from an earlier age (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, etc.)

How to Help Children Cope

- Give honest, age-appropriate answers to questions about hospitalization. Allow the child to ask questions and

express feelings. Children who get incomplete information may make up fantasies that are worse than the real situation.

- Let brothers and sisters be part of the preparing for and helping with the hospital experience.
- If an emergency hospitalization occurs, explain the situation to the healthy child as soon as possible.
- Schedule a hospital tour for siblings and the child, if possible.
- Act out hospital experiences with people, dolls or puppets. Using puppets and role play is a good way for children to express feelings they may be uncomfortable talking about.
- Read stories or provide coloring books about hospitals, or help the child make a story or picture book about what it's like to have a brother or sister go to the hospital.
- Arrange for the siblings to visit the hospitalized child, if possible. This can help clear up misunderstandings or fears they may have.

If you must be away from home with the hospitalized child, attempt to have contact daily with children left at home.

Here are some activities that may help both the parent and the hospitalized child stay involved with other brothers and sisters:

- Write or audio-record "letters" or telephone your children often.
- Video- or audio-record bedtime stories, or read them over the phone.
- Send a new piece of a puzzle every day.
- Send home safe, unused trinkets from the hospital, such as plastic tableware, seasoning packets, straws from the meal tray, and other safe, disposable items. Doing so helps them feel included.

Resources

When Molly Was in the Hospital: A Book for Brothers and Sisters of Hospitalized Children. Duncan, D. Rayve Productions, Inc., 1994. *Book for children discusses feelings siblings may go through.*

Becky's Story. Bethesda, Md.: Association for the Care of Children's Health, 1981. *Book for children discusses feelings of siblings after a child was hospitalized suddenly.*

Going to the Hospital. Rogers, F. New York: Putnam, 1988. *Book for children describes what happens during a stay in the hospital.*

A Special Gift for Mike. Walkden, M. & Congdon, B. Houston: Texas Children's Hospital, 1988. *Book for brothers and sisters of premature or ill babies with an afterward for parents.*

My Brother Is Sick. Kids Corner. Timonium, Md.: Milner Fenwick, Inc. *Video for children focuses on the emotional response of a well sibling to the hospitalization or her brother.*

Going to the Hospital. Bethesda, Md.: Association for the Care of Children's Health, 1986. *Book for parents discussing what happens during a stay in the hospital.*

Make An Appointment [651-290-8707](tel:651-290-8707)

This information is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care providers. If you have any questions, talk with your doctor or others on your health care team.

If you are a Gillette patient with urgent questions or concerns, please contact Telehealth Nursing at [651-229-3890](tel:651-229-3890).