

What About Siblings? Helping My Family Cope



When children are seriously ill or injured, families often worry about their child. Normal routines often go by the wayside to make room for hospital and doctors' visits. This can impact the child, parents and caregivers, and also brothers and sisters.

What should I expect after an illness or injury?

When a brother or sister is seriously ill or injured, children might feel confused, upset, afraid, numb or worried. Siblings will need time to adjust to their brother or sister's medical needs and treatment. Most siblings of ill or injured children react in very positive ways, with love, caring, and support. They often describe feeling glad that they are able to help out at home and to support their sibling. But some will also have trouble adjusting to this new and challenging situation.

Some things that might be happening with your other children:

1. They miss you and their brother or sister
2. They only partly understand the situation
3. They want to help out, but aren't sure how
4. They feel angry, jealous, or guilty and aren't sure if that is OK

You might see:

In younger children:

- Clinginess to parents or other caregivers
- Temper tantrums
- Doing things again that they had grown out of, like bed wetting
- Trouble sleeping, having nightmares or being afraid of the dark

In older children and teens:

- Wanting to be alone or to be with you all the time
- Being easily overwhelmed, jumpy or irritable
- Changes in behavior, more sensitive or quiet, or talking back or getting into fights
- Trouble sleeping or having nightmares
- Missing friends or feeling left out
- Problems in school

If these go on for more than a few weeks or bother your child a lot, you might seek additional help.



10 Tips for Helping Siblings Cope

- 1 Be patient and give everyone time to adjust.** Members of the same family can have very different reactions and need time to adjust to the changes. Talk as a family about how the illness affects everyone.
- 2 Keep to everyday routines.** Trying to keep to some everyday routines can help things feel more normal at home. Having regular routines (e.g. meals and bed times, chores) and activities give siblings things to expect and look forward to.
- 3 Set limits as usual.** It can be tempting to relax family rules to help siblings feel special or to make up for hard times. However, it is often better to keep most of your family rules and expectations the same.
- 4 Help your other children understand what is happening.** Serious illness or injury can be confusing and scary for a sibling. Children have active imaginations and they can get the wrong idea about what is happening. Ask questions to figure out what your child knows and give information in clear, age-appropriate ways.
- 5 Encourage your other children to share their feelings.** There are many ways to share feelings (talking, drawing, story-telling, hugging) and different times (dinnertime, bedtime) and places (in the car, at home, in the hospital). Help siblings name their feelings, such as being sad, scared, angry, jealous, or guilty. Share your own feelings and be a good listener even if what they have to say is hard to hear.
- 6 Spend time with your other children.** It is important to care for your ill or injured child. But remember that your other children miss you. Try to make plans to spend one-on-one time with your other children. If you are away a lot, call regularly so you can keep in touch.
- 7 Help siblings feel involved.** Allow them to be a part of their sibling's care. Plan a visit to the hospital and introduce them to the healthcare team. Let them choose which toys and games to take to the hospital. And make sure you let them know how much you appreciate the extra things they do to help out.
- 8 Help them keep in touch.** If their ill or injured sibling is away, find ways to help your other children keep in touch. Make cards, write letters, draw pictures, make videos or arrange for video chats, record a sibling reading a bedtime story. If possible, let them visit their brother or sister in the hospital.
- 9 Encourage siblings to have fun.** Often siblings feel guilt about wanting to have fun. Remind them that it is okay for them to do the things they enjoy, like spending time with friends, or hobbies and extra-curricular activities.
- 10 Seek help.** If your other children seem to be struggling, talk to your child's doctor about seeking help from a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or social worker.