

# A Parents' Guide to Sibling Adjustment in the NICU

Having a baby in the NICU can be a difficult time for the whole family. You will have many of your own feelings to deal with about this experience. Children also have many feelings during this time that they may need your help with. As part of our Family-Centered Care approach, we want to help you take care of the needs of your older children with baby brothers or sisters in our NICU.



It is important to support your other children and make sure they know they are loved and cared for, too. Having a sick or premature baby in the NICU can be made easier for children when they know why their baby brother or sister is staying in the hospital. This is best done in simple words with only a few details. You can tell them the baby isn't ready to come home from the hospital yet and must stay until they are well enough and/or big enough to come home. It may also help to let them know the baby is being well cared for by the doctors and nurses.

## Children may need to talk about their feelings.

Normal and common feelings can include:

**Anger** - the new baby is getting all the attention

**Confusion** - not understanding what is wrong with the baby or why she has to stay in the hospital

**Embarrassment/shame** - the new baby is different from other babies

**Fear** - worry that the baby will not get better, fear of parent's actions (crying, yelling)

**Guilt** - feeling that the illness or prematurity is their fault

**Loneliness** - Mom and Dad are not home as much, and they are left with a baby sitter more often

**Children may change their behavior, which can be normal while your baby is in the NICU.** If this lasts a long time or keeps getting worse, ask your child's pediatrician to suggest resources that may help. Children may go through changes such as:

- Acting out to get attention or relieve stress
- Being well behaved to win back your love/attention or try to make things better
- Having trouble eating or sleeping
- Complaining of feeling hurt, sick or in pain
- Bed wetting or other bathroom problems
- Acting younger than they really are
- Withdrawing from you or other family members

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## Things You Can Do to Help

**Learn as much as you can about your baby's condition.** The more you know, the better prepared you will be for the future. Ask your health care team questions. If you still do not understand, ask again.

**Talk to your children.** Use words your children can understand. Do not over explain, but be honest. Children may be afraid to ask questions, because they don't want to upset you. Offering information may help the child feel it is okay to ask about the baby. Children's fears and fantasies are often worse than reality. Also remember it's okay to say, "I don't know" when you don't have the answers.

**Let your children talk to you.** Allow your children to talk, ask questions, and share their needs. If they don't ask questions it doesn't mean they don't care. Children may share their feelings through art or activities. Ask them to make a picture or a card for the baby. Accept their feelings even if their comments are negative. Let your children know they can openly share their thoughts.

**Share your own feelings.** Explain that when you are sad, you cry. You can tell your children you are tired and worried about the baby. Say you're sorry if you take any anger out on your children. Children can understand your feelings but may not be able to handle them if you share them too intensely. You may wish to seek your own support from another adult, or the NICU social worker, during the most difficult times.

**Reassure your children.** Tell them they had nothing to do with the illness or prematurity. Children often blame themselves in difficult situations. It is common for them to believe that their negative thoughts may have caused the baby's illness and hospitalization.

**Try to keep as many scheduled routines as possible.** Change can be scary for kids so try to keep up their schedules and activities from before the new baby was born. You may need to ask for help and support. Doing the same things is very important to children. Keeping familiar routines can help your children feel a sense of control and reduce some of their anxiety.

**Use the same babysitter if possible.** It is helpful if you and everyone who cares for your children use the same words and explanations. Also try to have them keep the same rules you set with your children. Your children should feel special but they also need to know that rules have not changed, and someone will be there to help them stay within boundaries.

**Arrange "special time."** Set aside special time for each sibling so that they can look forward to having all of your attention for periods of time. Here are some ideas to give you a chance to tune into your child's feelings:

- Read a book together. You can find some special books in the NICU library about having a premature baby brother or sister.
- Take a walk outside or a ride in the car.
- Go for ice cream or a treat.
- Shop for a baby gift from the sibling and/or a small present for the sibling.
- Draw pictures.
- Tell or write stories.
- Play their favorite game.
- Have "cuddle time".
- Look at their baby book and/or pictures of them as babies, sharing happy feelings and stories about that special time.
- Have your child draw pictures or take a photo of him or her to hang in the baby's isolette.
- Make a "Brag Book" for your child to share with friends and family.
- Practice stress-reducing activities together (exercise, deep breathing, dancing/singing to music).
- Do any activity you enjoyed together before the NICU baby's birth.

**If your children are in school, tell their teachers about your NICU baby.** Let them know what is going on and ask them to show extra kindness and caring toward your children. Remind them that your children may have trouble focusing in school and that homework may not always be handed in on time while your baby is in the NICU.

**Visit the NICU with your children.** A short visit can be very helpful for siblings. Seeing what is going on is usually less upsetting than what they imagine is happening. It also shows that you are a "whole family" when you are able to visit the new baby together. Have your children draw pictures for their baby's isolette or have them sing or read to the baby. These are all ways you can help them feel a bond with the baby. Please make sure that siblings are healthy before bringing them to the NICU and understand there are certain times of the year, for example during flu season, when children will not be allowed in the unit. In such cases, signage will be posted.