HELPING SIBLINGS OF A CHILD WHO NEEDS MEDICAL CARE OR DEVELOPMENTAL SUPPORT

Children's Hospital LOS ANGELES

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

When one child needs medical care or extra support for a condition, it can be hard for the whole family. You may feel busy, tired, or stressed out with the care for that child while feeling unsure about how to help their siblings. The **Early Connections** team has some ideas to help.



How Siblings May Feel

Brothers and sisters often have many feelings about what is happening to their sibling. Even babies and toddlers. They may feel:

- Sad
- Scared
- Confused
- Left out
- Jealous
- That they want and need medical care too (for attention)
- Worried that they caused the problem
- Like they don't want to add more stress, so they may stop asking for help or start to hide when they are sick or need something
- Proud
- Protective
- That they need to be perfect so they can help their parents

All of these feelings are normal. There are no "bad" feelings. Siblings need your patience and time so they can get used to this change. Here are some ideas that may support other children in the family.

How to Help Siblings Feel Loved and Safe

Spend Special Time Together

Siblings need to know that they are still important. Try to spend special time with only them, even if it is just 10 or 15 minutes a day. Let them choose the activity. This time shows them that they matter and that you enjoy being with them.

If you need to be at the hospital, try to find friends and family who can bring the siblings to visit. This way, you can spend time with them while others care for your child who is in the hospital. And if that's not possible, remember you can always have a video call with siblings and do a short activity together (like drawing or singing).



Talk About What is Happening

Parents may not want siblings to know what is happening (to protect them). Siblings often have questions but may not always ask. They may feel it is not ok to talk about what is happening to their brother or sister. Open conversations can be helpful. But each child and situation is different.

It is important to encourage their questions and allow space for them to ask for and get the information they need. Start with open-ended questions. For example, "Why do you think your brother/sister is sick?" This can help you see what they understand and talk about anything they may feel confused about.

When they ask a question, make sure to:

- Ask what they already know and what they want to know.
- Use simple and honest words when talking about their condition or special needs.
- Explain things in a way they can understand at their age.
    - For example: "Your sister's body works a little differently," or "Your brother needs extra help from doctors."
- Answer their questions as clearly as you can.
- Know that it is okay to say, "I don't know."
- Help them know what to say to others about their siblings' special needs.

Let Them Share Their Feelings

When they ask a question, make sure to:

- Ask open-ended questions.
    - For example: "How are you feeling about this?"
- Listen without judging or correcting them.
- Let them know you hear them, and that their feelings are okay.
    - You can say, "It's okay to feel mad," or "I understand why that feels unfair."

Share some of your feelings so it doesn't feel like too much for your child to handle. Let them know who is there to support them.

Remember that sometimes children can't express their feelings with their words. But they may show us with how they act.

Younger children may:

- Become extra clingy and have a hard time being apart from you
- Have temper tantrums
- Start to have problems with sleeping
- Start doing things they did when they were younger (like having accidents again after being potty trained)

Older children may:

- Seem more irritable, sensitive, withdrawn, or quiet
- Start having trouble at school or with their peers

These are all signs that your child may need more support.



Keep Routines the Same

Children feel safe when they know what to expect. Try to keep daily routines, rules, and expectations as normal as you can. Regular bedtimes, school schedules, and family traditions help children feel more secure. Calendars can help children see what will happen next. For younger children, you can draw pictures in the calendar and help them count the days.

Give Them Some Choice and Not Too Much to Do

Try not to give siblings too much to do to help. It is okay for them to help sometimes, but they are still children. They shouldn't feel like they have to be the "strong one" or the extra helper all the time. They need time to play, relax, and just be kids.

When you can, let them make a choice. For example, you can ask "Would you like to go to camp or go to the hospital with us?" This gives them some control and know that it is okay if they choose not to go to the hospital. Notice when they may feel bad if they choose to take part in an activity their sick sibling can't. Let them know that you appreciate that they want to help and that you will be okay. Encourage them to take part in fun activities.

Find Ways to Notice Them

Pay attention to times when they are trying to be helpful, are extra patient, or deal with some emotional challenges. Describe what you see with simple words so you can help them feel seen and valued. For example: "I saw you shared your toy with your brother. That was very kind. I know it can be hard sometimes."

When joining medical visits, they may feel invisible (like people don't see them). It's okay for parents to ask providers to greet and talk to the healthy sibling.



Help Them Feel Included

Look for ways to include siblings. When it is okay, let them come to the doctor's visit or help in small, safe ways. Make sure to celebrate their milestones, too. Each child in the family deserves to feel noticed and loved.

Communicate with Teachers and Daycare Providers

Talk to teachers and daycare providers about what is going on with your child who needs medical or developmental support. Share as much or as little as you feel comfortable. This information can help educators and providers understand and support siblings as they deal with the stress that may be at home.

Get Community Help

It is helpful for families to meet other families who have a child with similar medical conditions. Look for family events through support groups for your child's condition. This can be very helpful for siblings.

When to Get Extra Help

Sometimes siblings may need extra support. It may help to talk to a counselor or therapist if you notice they have:

- Big changes in how they act
- Sadness that doesn't go away
- A hard time sleeping
- Problems at school

The **Early Connections** therapists can talk with you about these issues and help you find support. Hospitals also have Child Life Specialists who are there to help siblings, share information about medical equipment, or offer other supportive activities. Getting support early can make a big difference.

Other useful Early Connections Handouts:

Helping Young Children with Feelings Using Homemade Books

Source: CHLA

https://uscucedd.org/hubfs/18185025849-OneSheet-EarlyConnectionsProgram-Books-2025-English.pdf

Taking Care of Yourself When Your Baby is Sick or in the Hospital

Source: CHLA

https://uscucedd.org/hubfs/18185025849-OneSheet-EarlyConnectionsProgram-TakingCareofYourself-2026.pdf

Books for children:

- **The Perfect Shelter** by Clare Helen Welsh
- **At the Hospital** by Carron Brown
- **Cloud Babies** by Eoin Colfer (Author), Chris Judge (Illustrator)

Books to help with separation:

- **The Invisible String** by Patrice Karst (Author), Joanne Lew-Vriethoff (Illustrator)
- **The Kissing Hand** by Audrey Penn and Ruth Harper
- **What Will I Do If I Miss You** by Melissa T. Shultz and Lilia Miceli
- **Hi, Juice Box!**

Activities:

- Daniel Tiger Goes to the Hospital

Where can I find online resources for more support?

Helping Siblings

Source: Health Care ToolBox

https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/helping-siblings

Siblings of Children with Chronic Illnesses or Disabilities

Source: Healthy Children.org

Siblings of Children with Chronic Illnesses or Disabilities - HealthyChildren.org

Supporting Siblings of Children with Chronic Illness or Special Needs

Source: Info About Kids.org

https://infoaboutkids.org/blog/supporting-siblings-of-children-with-chronic-illness-or-special-needs/

Remember

Siblings need love and support as well. Be sure to:

- Talk to them openly
- Listen to their feelings
- Spend special time with them.
- Get the help of friends and family.
- Ask for support from mental health providers, social work, or child life specialists.
- Take care of yourself!
  - Taking care of siblings and yourself helps the whole family, including your child with special medical or developmental needs.

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Scan the QR code on the left for more resources from CHLA experts.

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