

Why is it important to talk to my other children about their brother or sister's condition?

Brothers and sisters can have a hard time when one child in the family is diagnosed with a long-term condition. They can feel:

- Jealous of the attention their sibling is getting
- Jealous of the gifts the ill child may be getting
- Missing you if you have to spend time in hospital
- Feeling second best
- Having normal routines disrupted
- Missing out on normal social events
- Having to stay with other relatives at times.

It can sometimes be hard for you to understand this when you are so overwhelmed by all that has to be done for your ill child. You may expect your other children to cope without fuss, as you and the ill child have so much to think about. Some brothers or sisters may behave badly to get your attention, or because they are frightened, and this can be hard to understand and deal with patiently.

Explain what is happening

Why?

Brothers and sisters are often in the dark about what is happening, and need to be given a simple, clear and honest explanation of what is wrong. If they are not told the truth, children often imagine something even worse is going on.

Parents sometimes worry that children will be burdened with too much information, but they usually prefer to be told the truth. If you don't tell them the truth, they may find out anyway from friends or from the internet.

How?

- Find a quiet time to sit down with your other children
- Ask what they already know about the situation
- Give a clear explanation, guided by their age
- Ask if they can explain it back to you, to check if they have understood
- Ask if they have any questions
- If you don't know the answer, say so and try to find out together
- If old enough, you could search the internet together for answers
- Give them updates when the situation changes
- Make sure to talk about it again in future. Children may have different questions as they mature and understand in a new way.

Common worries of brothers and sisters

- Some children worry that they were to blame for their sibling's illness
- Some fear they may catch the illness too
- Children don't like being asked to keep secrets
- Whispering to the doctor in front of children will be worrying, as they will imagine something awful is happening
- Brothers and sisters may worry if they can't visit their ill sibling in hospital.

Other ways to help

- Your other children could attend hospital appointments to ask the doctor questions, or just to feel included
- Maybe they could help with treatments, e.g. doing physiotherapy exercises, helping to lay out equipment, etc
- Prepare children for a hospital stay by telling them in good time, and letting them know the arrangements for who will look after them. Try to keep their usual activities going
- If you are away from them for a long time, keep in touch by text or phone. Try using Skype so the children can talk to each other
- Write little notes for them to find in their lunch box, or under their pillow so they know you are thinking of them even though you are in hospital
- Try to keep to normal rules and limits to help keep some structure in their world
- Give them a way of explaining what is wrong with their brother or sister to friends and acquaintances. Rehearse what they should say
- Spend individual time with brothers or sisters when you can and try to stay involved in their activities and thoughts.

Useful services

Paediatric Psychology and Liaison Service (PPALS) is a specialist team within the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Edinburgh that works with children and young people whose emotional difficulties are impacting on their daily functioning. Try the ideas in this leaflet first, but if things are really tough, ask your doctor to refer.

Talking about your child's medical condition to brothers and sisters



Produced by the Paediatric Psychology and Liaison Service,
Royal Hospital for Sick Children, Edinburgh

Date: June 2013

Review date: June 2015

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