

SUPPORTING SIBLINGS OF NICU BABIES

A Family Guide

Supporting siblings during a NICU stay involves maintaining open communication, offering emotional support, and ensuring they feel included. Thoughtful attention to their needs can build resilience and strengthen family bonds during this challenging time.

Communicating Effectively

- **Use Age-Appropriate Language.** Tailor explanations to your child's developmental level. For younger children, use simple, concrete terms:
- **Encourage Questions.** Let siblings share their thoughts and concerns. Answer honestly using language they can understand.
- **Provide Regular Updates.** Keeping siblings informed about the baby's condition makes them feel more secure.
- **Express Your Own Emotions.** Seeing adults express emotions in healthy ways supports children's emotional development. Talk about feelings and model how you manage them.

The baby is sick and needs help from the doctors.

The baby is at the hospital to get stronger.



Building Moments of Normalcy

- **Maintain Routines.** Stick to regular schedules when possible to provide a sense of security.
- **Encourage Engagement in "Regular" Activities.** Make sure siblings have the opportunity to spend time with friends and do activities they enjoy.

Promoting Sibling Bonding

- **Provide Visual Connections.** Share pictures or videos of the baby to help siblings feel close.
- **Support Creative Expressions.** Encourage siblings to draw pictures or write letters for the baby, which can be displayed near the infant's isolette.
- **Involve Them in Care when Appropriate.** Older siblings often want to help. Offer opportunities, like reading to the baby or picking out a toy.



★ Preparing for Visits

- **Discuss what to Expect.** Describe what the NICU looks like, including medical equipment, the baby's appearance, and visiting guidelines.
- **Plan for Emotional Support.** Consider the timing of visits and what your child needs to feel supported before, during, and after.



★ Supporting Emotions and Coping



- **Spend Quality Time.** Dedicate one-on-one time with each sibling without phones or distractions.
- **Use Educational Resources.** Explore books and online materials to help siblings understand and cope.
- **Encourage Expressive Activities.** Activities like drawing or storytelling help siblings express their feelings.
- **Teach Coping Skills.** Help your child identify simple coping skills like belly breathing to use if they feel big emotions. Name some signs that they may need to go to an adult for support.
- **Ask for Help.** Child life specialists or counselors can be resources if siblings need individual attention and support. Ask if providers have experience supporting families with medically ill children.

★ Helping Siblings Share Their Story

- **Talk About what to Say.** Talk through different ways a child can tell friends or others about what's happening with their sibling, if they want to.
- **Communicate with Teachers.** Let teachers know that your child has a hospitalized sibling—this can give context for behavior changes or absences. Make sure your child knows who at school is aware of their situation and can support them.

