

Helping your other children cope when their brother or sister is ill or in hospital: information for families

We know that life can be stressful when your child is unwell or in hospital. This stress is increased if you also have other children at home to look after. Parents report that sometimes brothers and sisters of a child who is ill can be affected too. They may show behaviour changes, such as being more clingy to their parents, tantrums or challenging behaviour, non-specific ailments such as tummy aches or headaches, sleep disturbances, noticeably low mood or becoming withdrawn.

This information sheet from Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) aims to give you a few ideas about the issues that may be facing your other children. All these ideas and suggestions come from our play team, who between them have many years of experience working with children, young people and families in hospital. If you have any ideas of your own or particular activities that work with your child, please contact us to tell us about them.

Lots of feelings: missing you

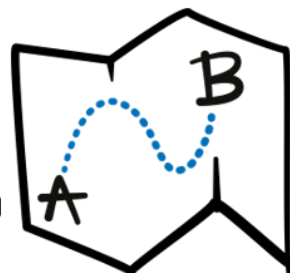
Any change to everyday routines can be unsettling. If a parent and brother or sister is away from home from any length of time, this will have an effect on your other children. Even if your children have their other parent or another relative they know well to look after them while you are staying in hospital, routines will change and things will be different.

If they are not sure what needs to happen at what time, filling in a care schedule for those adults caring for your other children at home can help. There is one in our Family File you can download and complete.

Try to keep to routines as much as possible – for instance, by sticking to usual mealtimes and bedtimes. This will help brothers and sisters have a framework each day so they know what is happening.

If at all possible, brothers and sisters should still go to school and do their usual activities. Tell the nursery, school or activity leader that one of your children is in hospital – it is helpful for them to know just in case any problems arise. They may be able to offer additional support or reassurance to your other children while their sibling is unwell.

If possible, try to have some regular time with your well children, so that they know they are important to you too.



If it is impossible to be with your child at home, you could leave them an important item of yours to look after or as a comforter until you return.

Jealousy

It is natural for you to need to focus your attention on your sick child, but this can cause other children in the family to feel jealousy or resentment. This can be made worse if others (including relatives and friends) focus a lot of attention on the sick child.

Jealousy can be expressed in many ways, from general behaviour changes such as tantrums and arguing or by hitting out at or damaging things belonging to your sick child.

It may help to include your other children as much as possible, by inviting them to visit the hospital or make pictures for their brother or sister or talking to them on the phone. Some siblings find the hospital environment boring or stressful – ask them how much they would like to visit, have phone contact or be involved in their brother or sister's care. Encourage relatives and friends to include your other children in any special presents or visits or to specifically visit them at home.

Anger

Some children react to their brother or sister being ill by becoming angry. Anger can be the easiest way for them to express complicated emotions, such as fear or lack of understanding. Angry outbursts and tantrums can be distressing for children and adults – children may feel remorseful or frightened at the strength of their emotions. They may need extra reassurance and help to explore big emotions.

Reassure your children that it is alright to feel sad or angry and give them the opportunity to share their emotions. If your children are young, you might want to play 'hospitals' or use art to explore how they are feeling. Story books about feelings

can also be helpful – see the suggestions at the end.

Guilt

Children may not always understand why their brother or sister is ill. It is possible that they may think that it is their fault. Explaining what has happened can be helpful to address any concerns or fears that they have caused an illness or injury. It is also not unusual for siblings to have feelings of guilt because they are healthy but their brother or sister is unwell. Play can be helpful for some children - talking to the play specialists at GOSH may be useful.

Embarrassment

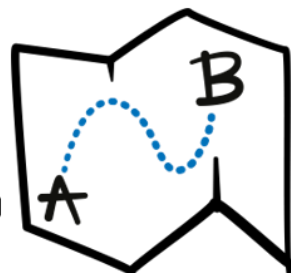
As they grow older, children start to notice when things look and feel 'different' to themselves and others. Having a sick brother or sister may be something that causes them to feel 'different' to their friends. Talk to your other children about their brother or sister and what makes them 'different'. Together you could work out (and practice) what to say if other people ask them questions.

If their brother or sister shows behaviour that is challenging, they may be worried about going out as a family. Lots of places now do 'relaxed' events for people with additional needs that you might all enjoy – check out your local cinema or theatre for details.

Practical matters: make use of technology

In some ways, now it is much easier to keep in touch than it was previously. Use video calling to your children at home – perhaps to read a bedtime story or hear what they had done at school.

Video calling can also reassure your children about each other – talk to ward staff to see when would be a good time. You can use our free Wi-Fi to save data charges on your mobile phone.



Brothers and sisters at home may be interesting to explore the hospital too. You could also show them the virtual tour and short films about the wards at GOSH so they know what to expect. Visit our website for details.

Asking for help

Managing family life when one child is in hospital and others are being looked after at home is stressful. This may be the time when you will need to ask for help from family and friends, particularly if there are school runs or activities to organise.

Not knowing what to say

Confusion is common if your children at home do not understand why their brother or sister is in hospital. They may develop their own explanation for what is going on or may imagine something far worse. They may worry that they are going to 'catch' an illness or fear that their brother or sister will never get well.

Try to give your other children as much information as they need to understand what is

happening with their brother and sister. You could read a book or watch a story about being in hospital. Have a look at the end of this information sheet for some ideas.

If you are unsure what to say or how to talk to your children about illness, treatment or being in hospital, talk to the play specialists at GOSH for some ideas and support.

Explaining to other people

Other people who do not have experience of having a sick child may not be able to understand the challenges you go through every day.

Children are more likely to ask honest questions about difference. Adults tend to avoid asking questions but this may add to feelings of isolation for families with a sick child. Consider what you could say if you are asked about your child's illness or treatment. Consider ways that you can ask for the help your family needs. It is important for your other children to see you dealing with other people confidently – this will help them act in a similar way.

Further information and support

At GOSH, talk to your **psychologist or play specialist** for ideas about what you can do to help your other children. We can organise sessions with them during school holidays to help them develop coping strategies. Talk to your nurse about arranging to see the psychologist or play specialist for your area.

Support organisations for specific conditions can be very helpful and the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (Pals) at GOSH can put you in touch with a relevant organisation. For example, the National Autistic Society has a page on their website for brothers and sisters of someone with an autism spectrum disorder at www.autism.org.uk/about/family-life/siblings.aspx

The umbrella organisation **Contact** (previously called Contact a Family) produces helpful information sheets. You can telephone them on 0808 808 3555 or visit their website at www.contact.org.uk.

Sibs is a UK organisation especially for children, young people and adults with a brother or sister who is ill or has additional needs. As well as information, they hold regular family days so your other children can meet others in a similar situation. Visit their website at www.sibs.org.uk for further details.

The **Sibling Support Project** is based in the US but is a worldwide organisation holding workshops and providing information for and about brothers and sisters. Visit their website at www.siblingsupport.org.



What? Why? Children in hospital is a Scottish organisation providing videos about health and hospital for children. Visit their website at www.whatwhychildreninhospital.org.uk

Books

This is just a selection of children's books for various ages – see if you can borrow them from your local Public Library. We are not recommending these books specifically by listing them here – other books may be available.

Hospitals and health

- Paddington goes to hospital by Michael Bond – ISBN 0 008 149 240
- The midnight gang by David Walliams – ISBN 0 062 561 065
- My amazing body machine: a colourful visual guide to how your body works by Robert Winston – ISBN 0 241 283 809
- Operation ouch!: the humanual by Ben Elcomb, Dr Chris van Tulleken, Dr Xand van Tulleken – ISBN 0 141 375 973

Feelings and emotions

- Ruby's worry: a big bright feelings book by Tom Percival – ISBN 1 408 892 154
- Ravi's roar: a big bright feelings book by Tom Percival – ISBN 1 408 892 189
- All about feelings by Felicity Brooks, Frankie Allen and Mar Ferrero – ISBN 1 474 937 11X
- What am I feeling?: defining emotions by Katie Flanagan and Anna Krupa – ISBN 1 786 239 914

Television and websites

The CBeebies® channel from the BBC produces couple of series about everyday life, including health and hospitals – watch the episodes together so you can answer any questions.

- Topsy and Tim - www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/topsy-and-tim
- Get Well Soon with Dr Ranj - www.bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/shows/get-well-soon

The CBBC™ channel for older children also has a series you might find helpful.

- Operation Ouch! With Dr Chris, Dr Xand and Dr Ronx - www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/shows/operation-ouch

