

# Family Education Sheet

## Helping Siblings Cope with Your Child's Illness



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Until every child is well™

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Sometimes when a child has health care needs, her siblings (brothers and/or sisters) worry and feel sad, angry or guilty. It's normal for them to have these feelings—often at the same time. It takes time to work through these feelings. Siblings may be upset or anxious even after your child comes home from the hospital. This Family Education Sheet gives you information about how to help siblings cope.

### How might siblings show their feelings?

Children often don't know how to talk about their feelings. Therefore, they express themselves in other ways, such as:

- Eating more or less
- Becoming quiet
- Spending time alone or away from family
- Trying very hard to please parents or other grown-ups
- Acting-out by not listening, fighting or hitting
- Seeking more affection than usual
- Returning to younger behaviors, like wetting the bed, "baby talk" or sucking a thumb
- Pretending to be sick like their sibling who has been ill

### What might a brother or sister feel?

- **Sad** because they miss you and your sick child.
- **Lonely** because they've been away from their parents or alone. They may feel left out if they don't know what's happening.
- **Worried** about you and **afraid** about what is happening to their sick brother or sister. They may believe that everything is changing and won't be the same again. They may think that they will get sick or worry that their parents will get sick.
- **Guilty** if they think they caused the illness because they did something mean or had mean thoughts. Or, they feel guilty because they are healthy.
- **Jealous and angry** of the attention given to your sick child. They may act out by not following rules or fighting. They may complain of feeling sick to get attention.
- **Confused** because they don't know what is happening, what might happen next or why it's happening.

### How can I help?

- Talk as a family about what is happening with your sick child and why your child is sick.
- Give simple and honest explanations.
- Encourage questions and say that you will try to answer them or find the answers.



- Say that you understand how hard it is to be going through this. This will help your child see that these feelings are normal.
- Encourage talking about feelings. Let siblings know that it's OK to cry, be angry or happy and have mixed feelings.
- Keep daily routines as normal as possible, such as school, meals, naps and bedtimes.
- Give your other children special attention whenever possible.
- If siblings are interested and comfortable, bring them to visit the hospital. Talk with staff about how to prepare them for these visits. If a visit is not possible, arrange phone calls.
- Suggest drawing pictures or making cards to send to the hospital.
- Tell teachers and daycare providers about the changes at home.
- Get support from family and friends.

### How can the hospital staff help?

There are many people at Boston Children's Hospital who can help you and your family.

Child Life specialists, nurses, social workers, psychologists, doctors and nurse practitioners can answer your questions, connect you with support services, suggest books to read and help you talk with your other children.

*This Family Education Sheet is available in Arabic and [Spanish](#).*