

# KIDS Worry TOO

A Guide for Adults Helping Children  
Understand Hospitalization



Nebraska<sup>™</sup>  
Medicine

# kids *worry* too

The hospitalization of a parent, brother or sister, family member, or close friend can be as frightening or traumatic to a child as it is for the person who is actually in the hospital. The non-hospitalized children may be in situations never experienced before. They may be separated from their parents for an unusual length of time, in an unfamiliar setting with unfamiliar routines.

## *Reactions of Children*

**How children react to the hospitalization of a family member is determined by many factors.** These include:

- The age and developmental level of the healthy children.
- The seriousness of the illness or handicap of the patient and length of time it has been present.
- The amount of time the healthy children are separated from parents.
- The attention that is given to the healthy children's feelings.
- The quality of explanations and answers the healthy children receive to questions about the hospital and the situation.

A variety of feelings about the hospitalization of a family member may be experienced by children of all ages. There also may be a variety of reasons why they experience these feelings. Depending on the children's developmental level and on their perception of the hospitalization, some feelings may be more prominent than others. Their feelings may also fluctuate from day to day.



## They may have feelings of...

- **Confusion** as to what is happening and why, especially if the hospitalization was very sudden or unexpected. They might not even understand what a hospital is.
- **Guilt** about angry wishes or thoughts that they had toward the ill person. Younger children, especially, may even have feelings that they are in some way responsible for the illness and its cause. It is not uncommon for children to wish someone were dead or sick. They may feel they somehow caused the hospitalization. They may also have feelings of guilt because they don't have a health problem themselves.
- **Anger** toward parents for not protecting the sick person from illness and also concern that the parents will not protect them from getting sick. Their trust in their parents may be shaken, and they may have feelings of insecurity.
- **Fear** that they may become sick themselves or catch it and have to be hospitalized, especially if they are unsure of the reason for the hospitalization.
- **Abandonment** and **worry** about not having their own needs and wants met. They may wonder who will be taking care of them or making sure they are all right.
- **Rejection** or being left out. If the children are not kept involved or updated about the hospitalization, they may begin to feel like outsiders to the situation and not as important family members. They may also be jealous of all of the attention and concern the patient is given and be disappointed that they don't seem to receive or deserve an equal amount.
- **Resentment** because there are two sets of rules or standards: one for the hospitalized person and one for the other family members.
- **Embarrassment** because of the patient's condition. The hospitalization may draw a great deal of attention to the children from friends, relatives, teachers, peers and even hospital staff. Children may not know how to interpret this.

There are several ways in which children may express their concerns or feelings. Many reactions depend on the individual child as well as on their age and developmental level. Different ages have different ways of understanding or coping with stressful situations. There may even be differences between children in the same situation. Sometimes it may be difficult for children to talk about their feelings, but they may be able to act them out in various behaviors.

**Examples of ways children may express their feelings include:**

- more clingy or dependency on parents or caregivers.
- eating changes – lack of appetite or overeating.
- withdrawing, becoming less talkative.
- acting out or misbehaving to get more attention (this can be both positive and negative attention).
- showing outbursts of stored up feelings.
- returning to habits from an earlier age (such as bedwetting, thumb sucking, carrying a security blanket or toy).
- showing feelings of jealousy and competition, as well as fighting with other family members or friends.
- declining school performance.
- becoming socially withdrawn – showing a decrease in interest or involvement in activities outside the family situation.
- becoming withdrawn from the family unit and more involved in activities outside the family. This can be a blocking or denial type of reaction. “If I’m not there, I won’t have to face the situation.”
- showing signs of denial, or disinterest, or acting as if the illness isn’t as serious as it actually is.
- becoming obsessed with the patient and the patient’s things. The children may even complain of ailments similar to the patient’s.

## *Helping Children Cope*

There are several ways you can help children cope and understand the hospitalization of a family member. It is important to remember that incomplete information may cause images that are often worse than the real situation.

Encourage children to ask questions and express feelings. They may be hesitant to ask questions, especially if this is a very stressful time for the family. Give honest and understandable answers to their questions. Simple, direct answers are usually the most helpful.



**The following are other ways you can make the hospitalization of a family member easier to understand for children:**

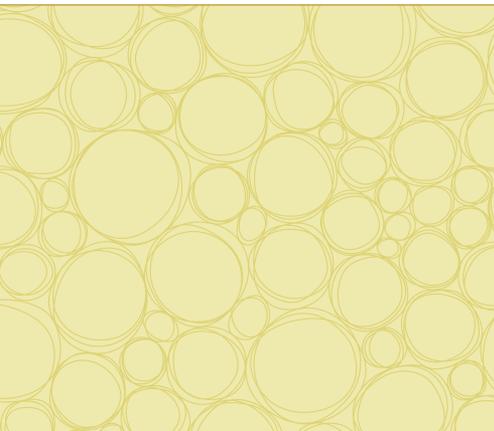
- Be honest before, during and after the hospitalization. It is better to give correct information rather than tell them something you will have to change later or something that could cause incorrect fantasies.
- Let the children know that it is okay to ask questions and talk about the hospitalization. Reassure them that if you become upset or cry, that is okay too. Help them understand it is alright to have feelings and they can express their feelings without losing control. They will turn to you for examples of appropriate behavior.
- Allow children to help in the preparation and planning. This is as important to the healthy children as it is for the hospitalized family member. Helping pack and ride to the hospital are examples of how they can participate. These are also excellent opportunities for talking and answering questions.
- If the hospital provides a tour for patients before hospitalization, allow the healthy children to attend also, if possible.
- If an emergency hospitalization occurs, explain it as soon as possible. Let them know how serious the illness or injury is and how soon they can see the hospitalized patient.
- Act out the hospital experience with people, dolls or puppets. Using puppets is a good way for children to share feelings they may be uncomfortable about.
- Read books or use coloring books with stories about hospitals. Another idea is to let the children make their own story-picture books on what it is like to have a family member go to the hospital. They could draw the pictures and you could write the story as they tell it to you.
- If the children display anger or frustration, find an activity or vigorous play outlet for them. Through play, children work through their feelings. It helps them release their anxieties as well as burn off excess energy in a constructive way.

## *Things You Can Do*

If you are staying at the hospital with the patient or if the healthy children are staying somewhere other than at home, attempt to have contact with them daily. Let them know where you are and what the plans are for everyone. When you are with them, if possible, spend alone time with them. This may be a good time for them to tell you some of their thoughts or feelings. You can help them find ways to cope and understand when you are not with them. Also, try to continue the normal and special activities of your children as much as possible, such as school or sports activities, birthday parties or holiday celebrations. These are still an important aspect of their lives.

### **Activities that may help the parent and patient stay involved with the healthy children are:**

- write or record messages to each other or talk on the phone as often as you can. Even if they cry when hearing your voice, allow these feelings to be expressed.
- record bedtime stories or read/tell them over the phone.
- send a new piece to a puzzle every day.
- send safe, trinkets from the hospital to the healthy children.
- have both the patient and healthy children make greeting cards, pictures and picture books for each other.
- if you cannot be with your children, ask them to keep a special



item of yours for you until you can be with them. It should be an item that they specifically associate with you. This helps them feel special and reassures them that you will be coming back.

- have a photo exchange between the patient and the healthy children. Let the healthy children select photos of themselves that they would like to send to the hospital for the patient. Place these on the patient's bed or in a place where they can be viewed easily by the patient. If possible, take a picture of the patient actually in the hospital to send to the healthy children. A digital camera is useful for this. If you do not have one, ask if the hospital has one. Pictures throughout the hospital stay can help keep the healthy children updated on the patient's progress. It also helps them prepare for what to expect when the patient comes home.
- let them read and respond to electronic and social messaging under the appropriate guidance of an adult.
- if possible, allow the healthy children to visit the patient in the hospital. This allows them to see where the patient is and helps clear up any fantasies. It is an opportunity for questions to be asked and it also helps the family to be involved in the hospitalization as a whole unit. It also helps the medical staff see the patient as part of a family unit and provide information to the rest of the family, too. It may help reduce stress for the patient and reassure the patient that the rest of the family is alright and that things will be the same when they go home. If a visit to the hospital by the healthy children is planned in advance, let the Child Life and nursing staff know so appropriate games and support items can be provided.

Before the visit, offer the children a simple explanation of the situation. You may say, "Patient (name) is in the hospital so the doctors and nurses can help him get better." If the patient can have visitors in the room, you may say, "You will see his room, where he eats and sleeps and where he plays (if patient is a child)." If you will have to take them to a waiting lounge or meditation room rather than the patient's room, describe this also and explain why they cannot go to the patient's room.

In order to prepare the children for some of the medical equipment, you should mention, "You may also see some of the special things that help him get better. If you have any questions, you can ask me." Depending on the situation and children's age, more or less information may be provided.

Remember, the Child Life and nursing staff are also available to provide additional support that your children may need concerning the hospitalization.



## *Typical Questions*

The following are some questions that your healthy children may ask, and some answers you may use as guidelines when talking with your children about the hospitalization. Again, remember to keep the children's age and developmental level in mind when answering them. When questions are asked, you may first want to ask the children what they think the answers to their questions are, (i.e. "Why do you think...") and clear up any misinterpretations they have and give them more information.

### **1) Why does the patient have to be in the hospital?**

"Patient has to be in the hospital because he is sick. The hospital has special medicine and equipment, and there are things that the nurses and doctors can do to help him get better faster than we could at home." (Remind them that this is a different kind of "sick" than when they are sick.) If there is surgery, you may say "Patient will have/has had an operation to fix his/her \_\_\_\_\_."

### **2) When is patient coming home?**

"Patient will come home as soon as he is well enough. The nurses and doctors will do everything they possibly can to make him feel better and come home as soon as possible."

### **3) Is patient going to die?**

*The children may have had an experience where a relative or acquaintance went to the hospital and died, so they may associate hospitalization with death.*

If the patient is potentially terminally ill, you may want to prepare the children for this. "The nurses and doctors will do everything they possibly can to help patient feel better and come home. We all hope he'll be able to come home." It is important to be receptive to the children's feelings at this time, and encourage them to let you know what they are feeling and thinking both now and later on. Books that explain death and dying to children maybe be available in your community.

If the patient is not terminally ill, reassure the children that the hospital staff is helping the patient to feel better and then focus on what will happen when the patient is home again.

### **4) Will I have to go to the hospital?**

If the children do not have a foreseeable problem, let them know when they are "sick", it is different than the patient's illness and that why they don't have to go to the hospital. If someday they have a problem that needs the special help of doctors and nurses or the special medicine or machines, then they may go to the hospital too. Reinforce that you will be there to help them. If the children have hereditary problems similar to the patient, let them know that for now they don't have to go to the hospital. Explain that at some time they may need to go to the hospital so the doctors and nurses can help them stay well and be comfortable. Be sure to encourage them to express their feelings about this.

## **5) Will I catch it?**

Again, emphasize that this is different from when they get sick, unless it is a hereditary illness. Then let them know that you will be there for them if they ever have to be hospitalized.

## **6) What will they do to patient in the hospital?**

“The doctors and nurses will do everything they possibly can to make patient feel better and get well as fast as possible. They may give him medicine, do special tests or take some special pictures to help them see what will help patient get well the fastest.” If there will be surgery, “Patient will have an operation to fix his/her \_\_\_\_\_ with special instruments so he won't have trouble with \_\_\_\_\_ anymore.” The children may also be concerned with practical things like food, clothing, sleeping arrangements, friends, etc. Let them know how these things are provided for both the patient and yourself. “Patient gets his meals on a tray in his room. Mom/Dad goes to the cafeteria to eat, etc.”

## **7) Why do you (parent) have to go to the hospital?**

“There may be things that are very strange or may hurt or be scary for patient, and I want to be there to help him feel more comfortable. The doctors and nurses aren't trying to be mean to patient. These are just things that need to be done to help him get better the fastest. I will miss you when I'm not with you. You may miss me and I wish I could be with you. You may be feeling scared, sad or even mad now, and those feelings are okay. I understand. Let's plan a special thing for us to do together when I get home and maybe we can talk more about your feelings and help you feel better.”

## **8) Do you love patient more than me?**

"I love you both. Patient needs some special attention from me now, and when you need some special attention I want to be able to be with you, too. I know you may be having a lot of different feelings now. What kinds of things might we do together to help you understand and feel better?"

## **9) Who will take care of me while you are gone?**

"I will make sure someone will always take care of you while I can't be with you." Give specific examples, such as "During the day you will be (at school, at home with \_\_\_\_\_, playing at \_\_\_\_\_ house, etc.) And at night you will sleep (in your own bed with \_\_\_\_\_ in the house, at \_\_\_\_\_ house, etc.) I will be thinking of you and missing you when I can't be there."

Be sure to let the children know if there are changes in arrangements as soon as possible. You may even want to make up a special calendar or daily schedule showing the children where they will be on each day as well as the time. If possible, give the children a special list of telephone numbers. Including emergency numbers, the number of the hospital room and/or where you can be reached, and numbers of friends and relatives they can call if they need help or are feeling lonely or upset.

Friends and relatives may have misconceptions or fears about the hospitalization and may ask your children questions. This may be upsetting to the children, especially when they don't understand. By discussing the hospitalization with your children, you help them to talk to others about it.

After the patient goes home, continue to let the healthy children participate in any home care that may be necessary. Spend some special time alone with them even after you have returned home.

## *Helpful Books*

Some children's books that may be helpful before, during and after the hospitalization are listed below. You may want to read them several times. These books may be available through the Child Life Department in your community, your library or bookstore.

What About Me? When Brothers and Sisters Get Sick. A. Peterking, M.D., Magination Press, Washington D.C. (1992)

My Sibling Scrapbook. Medical Memories LLC, Buffalo Grove, IL, (2010)

When Molly Was in the Hospital. D. Duncan, Rayve Productions Inc., Windsor, CA, (1994)



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