

NICU Impact on Siblings



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Babies who are born early or have intensive medical needs may have to stay in an area of the hospital called the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU. This impacts the whole family, including older siblings.

Q: How does the NICU experience affect siblings?

Having a baby brother or sister in the NICU can take an emotional toll on older siblings. The impact can vary and depends on factors like the ages of the siblings, the diagnosis of the baby, the length of the NICU stay and how the parent or primary caregivers are coping.

Q: What are some common behaviors that signal siblings may be struggling?

These behavioral cues will be different depending on the age of the sibling. Younger kids often regress in skills, exhibit "baby-like" behaviors and show increases in separation anxiety. Some siblings may revert to temper tantrums, want to be held more and drink out of a sippy cup when they've graduated to open cups. Older children may turn inward, become less expressive with their emotions or exhibit mood swings. They may also withdraw from family activities or things they previously liked.

Mixed emotions or wavering excitement about the baby can also be a normal part of welcoming a new baby to a family. But having that baby in the NICU can make these feelings even more complicated.

Any of these behaviors can feel distressing to a parent or caregiver, but most children exhibit these behavior changes on a short-term basis and families see improvement over time.

Q: How long are families impacted by a NICU experience?

The impact of a NICU admission on a family varies, and can depend on whether there are long-term medical needs associated with the baby's diagnosis or how difficult the NICU stay was emotionally.

We try to set families up with honest expectations so they can maintain consistent routines at home. Sometimes parents and their baby end up traveling far from home to receive NICU care. This could mean spending extended time away from their other children.

To lessen the negative impact on siblings, we encourage families to maintain typical routines as much as possible, rely on trusted caregivers and include siblings in visits to the NICU.

We encourage families to reach out to support services, both in the hospital and in their community, if they feel that their older children are demonstrating signs that they are not coping well.



Including older siblings in hospital visits can be very beneficial in demonstrating love and security.

Q: How can older siblings interact with their new sibling in the NICU?

We encourage all families to bring older siblings in to meet their baby brother or sister. During visits, siblings can read to the baby, create artwork for the baby's bedside and sometimes help with simple parts of the baby's care routine.

It is also a good idea to pack an activity bag before visits to help keep siblings engaged while they are at their baby's bedside for a visit.

Q: How can health care providers help?

All families have unique needs. Some families might benefit from working with a member of the child life team, while others might benefit more from meeting someone from social work or psychology. It's helpful to get to know all families, form bonds and then direct them to the best resources to meet their needs.

Q: How can parents help older siblings feel loved and secure during a challenging time?

Parents need to take care of themselves so they can care for their children. Parents need to rest, eat, stay hydrated and lean on support from the community and hospital so they can be supportive of their older children.

As much as they are able, parents and caregivers are encouraged to tune into each child's individual needs. If possible, we encourage daily checkpoints with each child over the phone. Children benefit from caregivers who can show them that many emotions are appropriate during a difficult time and that what they are feeling is valid.

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The National Coalition for Infant Health is a collaborative of professional, clinical, community and family support organizations.

The coalition focuses on education and advocacy promoting patient-centered care for all infants—whether born preterm or full term—and their families.

infanthealth.org

