

Communicating Effectively to Help Siblings Cope



INTRODUCTION

Consider the Other Children from the Very Beginning

From the time that their sibling is diagnosed with a serious illness, your other children will need your support. Sometimes, though never intentionally, parents become absorbed in the logistics of the sick child's needs, leaving little time left for their other children. Every family needs to figure out how they're going to attend to the practical pieces and the emotional needs of the other siblings in the household—and those who already may be living outside the home, but who will be affected as well.

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What Siblings May Be Experiencing

It is important to keep a developmental frame all this time: it depends on how old the children are.

The moment one child gets diagnosed, much of the family's attention and learning will be focused on that particular child and on that situation. Even though they completely understand that it is not intentional, siblings often report that they feel pushed aside by parents, shuttled from person to person. Yes, there may be caregivers, people to feed them, pick them up, take care of them, help them do their homework. But these people, however familiar, are not their parents. They feel almost abandoned.

Sometimes, jealousy can arise. Suddenly the sick sibling is receiving gifts and visits, and the other children may be wondering "Why not me?"

Siblings may also experience guilt, questioning why this happened to one child and not the other. They may also be experiencing relief, but they probably don't want to acknowledge that. They're very worried about burdening their parents, so they're not sharing about what happens. This can manifest in all kinds of ways: The sibling may typically behave perfectly because they don't want to rock the boat; they know the family is already upset, things are already shaky, so they're going to be super good. Other times, the child may act out or have a lot of separation anxiety and not want the parent to leave their side, or have trouble sleeping or have trouble with friends or in school.

Parents Need to Own How Stretched They Feel and Even Share That with the Other Children

You can use this time to model and teach important life skills in communication to your other children. Always give them a sense of what's actually going on and invite them in. Always try to make certain that the information received is age-appropriate. You can get help from a psychologist, a social worker, a child-life specialist, or somebody at the hospital who can help communicate with the other children about what is actually going on and how they might participate too.

You can't be in two places at one time, and sometimes you will feel guilty about having to attend to the sick child and not being able to be with your other children. It is important to let your other children know that you want to be with them as well. Tell them how much

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you love them, and that you are going to do the best you can to spend time with them. Tell them that you are going to do the best you can to share your time. Tell them that if they were sick, you would be doing this for them too.

Tell your other children that you want them to tell you how they are feeling — that it is safe for them to do that. Let them know that if there are special things or special events, someone is going to try and be there. And that if there is something they need, that they absolutely should let you know. Tell them that nothing is too small or unimportant, if it is important to them.

Then be sure to check in with them every day, even if it is only by phone (or Facetime or Skype or Zoom) from the hospital.

If you're staying at the hospital, make sure to say goodnight. Ask about their day, their friends, teachers, school. You can also tell them what you've been doing at the hospital with their sibling. This helps keep the other children in the loop, letting them know what's going on, so they don't wonder or worry more than necessary.

Wherever possible, invite your other children to be helpful. Kids like to help. They don't want to feel excluded, so use the resources that you have at the hospital or the clinic or wherever the care/treatment is occurring to bring the other children in. If your child is in the hospital, bring your other children in so they can see what the room looks like, what the playroom looks like, that it's not a scary place. Even spending just an hour at the hospital can be very helpful. Excluding siblings, even if your desire is to protect them, only increases their anxiety that something bad is happening.

They're Going to Have Questions – It's Important to Be Truthful

Depending upon how old they are, your children may ask a lot of questions. They may ask a few questions and retreat, and then come back hours or days later. It's important to respect their boundaries, and to be as truthful as possible. Offer short pieces of information. Let them take the information in and think about it; and if they come back for more information, answer their questions.

Prepare Yourself for the Questions

Kids can be very bold and far less inhibited than adults, which means they sometimes ask really tough questions right up front. These questions can be disconcerting and may make

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you uncomfortable. It can be helpful to get a professional (a psychologist or social worker or child-life specialist) to help you anticipate what some of the hardest questions might be. Then you can prepare for how you want to answer them, what you want your child to know. By preparing yourself, you can give answers in a compassionate and kind but confident way, and not feel panicked in the moment that you're going to say the wrong thing. Your being prepared will make the answers less scary for the child, even if it's difficult information to hear.

Be Certain You Know What the Child is Really Asking Before You Respond

Don't give children information they haven't really asked for. For example, they may ask, "Is my sister going to die?" Depending on their age when they ask this question, they probably aren't asking if the sister could die; but rather, if she is going to die soon (today, this week). It can be very alarming to hear such questions and it is important to find out what the child is really asking, so that you can respond appropriately.

Children learn things from all different places and may have a lot more knowledge than you think they have, even if you haven't been the one to share the information. Also important: what they know, or think they know, may not be accurate. Your child may also have a misperception or misunderstanding, and you can help clear up their confusion without giving them an explanation that is more than they can handle. So find out what your child thinks and already knows, and verify or correct—gently.

For example, your child may repeat something they overheard in a telephone conversation, but they have taken it out of context. You can say, "I think you heard me talking about some test results. Your brother has many tests, and the doctors put all the results together to understand what is happening. That was only one test. We will know a lot more later." Or, a friend may repeat their parent's comment about the situation. You can say, "Of course they are very concerned. But they don't have the whole story. What concerns you?"

Your child may also have interesting questions on a topic where you have very specific thoughts (such as questions about death), which may lead you to provide too much information, possibly information that is not appropriate for a younger child. To deal with this, try answering "That's a great question. What do you think?" Then you can learn what your child is really thinking or already knows. They may have an entire framework and an answer for the question. They may just need to ask a question to see whether you can tolerate the topic.

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Don't Avoid the Hardest Questions: Changes in Baseline

Eventually you will be faced with shifts in your child's condition, and the siblings are bound to notice. For some parents, it's just too difficult to acknowledge these changes without being prompted by questions. But confirming what the siblings see, whether it is reduced energy (more sleeping) or the sense of more pain (crying or restlessness) or lack of appetite, can open the door to more conversation about what the siblings can expect. A child-life specialist can help with this.

Selected Tips from CPN Families

- Our older children helped give their younger brother his medication.
- If we couldn't answer a question that our sons had about their brother, we asked the child-life specialist to answer it.
- We tell our older daughter, age 13, everything about her sister's condition. We don't keep anything from her.
- I told my son that it was OK to be really sad and cry about his younger sister's illness. We cried together. We got our older daughter grief counseling from the very beginning, so she would have someone to talk to, to share her sadness with in case she was trying to protect us.
- We had to teach our older daughter's teachers about the situation at home, so they would know what she was going through at home with her brother. Sometimes we let other family members stay with our daughter at the hospital, so we could be home with our other children.
- **Print Your Own Conversation Cards**
Print and gift these cards to your children, giving them an outlet and opportunity to express their thoughts and questions. Be sure to set a specific time each week to discuss anything your child would like to share from the cards. Setting and sticking to a discussion time will help your child to feel heard and taken care of. These cards can also be used as a tool for a grief counselor or school support person.

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CONCLUSION

Communicate Effectively—and Compassionately— to Help Siblings Cope

Parents want the best for all of their children, and maintaining loving connections and honest communication is very important, especially in a crisis. It is very easy, and it's very understandable, for parents to be consumed with the needs of their very sick child. Being alert to the needs and feelings of the other siblings, and responding to them as best you can, will help keep the entire family strong. Do not hesitate to seek advice and professional help for yourself and your children—it can make all the difference.