

Having a baby in the neonatal unit is difficult for the whole family, including older siblings. Some of the difficulties they may struggle with are:

- Normal reactions to a new baby in the family
- Confusion about what has happened to the baby
- Their own feelings about baby being unwell
- Stress and upset of family members
- Missing getting to know their new sibling
- Being separated from their parents
- Changes in their routine and care

## Common Feelings and Behaviours

Like adults, children will have a range of different emotions which it may be hard for them to understand or express. These feelings often show up in changes in behaviour. It can be very difficult to deal with this as well as coping with the challenges of having your baby in the neonatal unit. Try to be patient with your child (and yourself!) and make sure you are looking after yourself and talking with others for support.

### Common Feelings:

- Left out of their new sibling's life
- Missing usual time and attention from parents
- Jealous or lonely
- Anger towards their parents for being away
- Scared of other people becoming sick
- Guilty they are healthy
- Angry with their new brother or sister
- Confused about all the changes in their life

### Common Behaviours:

- Misbehaving due to overwhelming emotions
- Quiet and withdrawn
- Clingy or demanding
- Disrupted sleep
- Eating difficulties
- Return to younger behaviours, ie thumb sucking, bed wetting
- Having trouble in school
- Easily upset
- Ignoring or rejecting parents
- Disinterest or refusal to talk about sibling

This leaflet gives ideas to help understand how siblings may feel and what you can do to support them.

**"When my second baby was admitted to NICU, my older daughter was shuffled around between school, her own home, and relatives' homes while her dad and I went to visit her sister at the hospital every day.... By evening, when she finally got some alone time with her parents, we were exhausted and unable to give her the attention she craved. ....she was constantly being asked to make accommodations for her new sister."**

- NICU PARENT

## Taking Care of Yourself

Most parents tell us they feel torn between being with their baby in NICU, and being at home with their family and it feels impossible to give everyone what they need. It is important to be kind to yourself and remember you are doing your best in a very difficult situation.

We know parents put their own needs last but you are the most important people in the world to your children. They need you to look after yourselves so you can continue being ok and supporting them. We know it is difficult but eating and drinking regularly, getting as much sleep as you can, taking breaks and getting outside will all help both you and your family. Try to do things that have helped you before in times of distress, make time to take short breaks, talk to others and do things that bring you some comfort.

You can find more ideas about how to look after yourself to help you look after your children in our "Parent Self Care" leaflet.



**If you would like to talk more about how to help your older children, or any other challenges of the Neonatal journey please contact Catriona, the neonatal unit psychologist, on 07816364421.**



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## SUPPORTING SIBLINGS

WHILE A BABY IS IN  
NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE

## Routine

Time in the neonatal unit can be unpredictable and to start with you will probably feel confused and unsure what is happening when. Once things begin to feel a little more settled trying to keep siblings to regular routines as much as possible gives them a sense of safety and control at this confusing time. It can also be helpful to develop a visual chart so your children know when they will see you and who will be caring for them when. When routine isn't possible or plans change try to take time to explain this to children.

It can be tempting to relax the rules, but children need clear and consistent boundaries, especially during difficult times. So try to stick with the normal rules and limits while letting siblings know you understand they may be having some big feelings right now.

## Sibling Connection

It's hard for siblings knowing they have a new brother or sister but not being able to see them. There are lots of ways to build this relationship and help them to feel involved and important. For example:

- Talking to them about your baby's personality, likes and dislikes
- Asking them to send favourites books to read
- Write a letter or draw a picture for baby
- Ask for a cuddle to pass on to their baby brother or sister
- Choosing baby clothes or muslins to use in hospital
- Recording them singing or reading for baby
- Video calls
- Sending questions to the nurses or and receiving written replies
- Showing them photos of the unit explaining equipment
- Talking for the baby to their sibling ie baby brother says he liked the book, could you send another one"

## Parental Connection

Although it is very difficult to leave the neonatal unit it is really important to try to have some time with your older children when possible. We understand you have more than one child and don't expect you to be here 24/7. You can call or use VCreate to help you feel close to your baby when you are not here. Try to set aside special time for your other children to read books, sing, tuck them in, visit the park or cuddle up with a movie. You can also use this time to go through the sibling support pack with your child, which is full of activities to support positive coping and the bond between siblings.

Visiting the hospital, unit or accommodation where you are spending time can also help them to feel closer to you and their sibling.

### You can help them to find ways to cope with their big feelings:

*"I know it's hard with your baby brother being sick and us being away a lot. It's OK to feel angry and upset about it but I can't let you hit. Maybe we can help your big feelings by taking some deep breaths or kicking your ball around outside."*



To help children feel close to you when you are apart you can:

- Have matching objects you both carry and hold when you are missing each other
- Draw a kiss on your child's hand or clothing so they can touch or kiss this if they are missing you to remember how much you love them
- Make time to talk to them about themselves and their day to day activities and interests
- Leave special notes for them to find during the day
- Remind them you can love more than one person at a time
- Read books which help children know you love them no matter what (The Invisible String, No Matter What)

## Talking About What's Happening

One of the most important ways you can help your children is by talking about what is happening. It's normal to want to protect our children from difficult news. However, children will pick up that something is wrong and make up explanations in their own mind which are often more frightening or confusing. Giving a simple, age-appropriate explanation about why their baby brother/sister is in the hospital can help them feel less confused and upset.

You can use books, drawing or play to find out about what they already know and any questions they may have. Carrying on talking regularly about any changes or milestones will help them understand and feel involved. If this kind of talking feels difficult your nurse or the NICU psychologist can support you and help you find the words.

## Talking About Feelings

Check in with them about how they are feeling and let them know they can feel or say whatever they need to. When children find it hard to express this, giving them words for the different feelings they might be having can be helpful:

***"Some children feel sad/scared/angry when their baby brother/sister has to stay in hospital"***

You can also help them by sharing your own feelings and what you do to cope. Some parents worry about getting upset in front of their children and that this may make them feel worse. Children can already sense people are upset and can feel confused or guilty when they don't know why. They may think it means they need to hide their feelings. Adults talking openly and showing emotion tells them it's ok to have all sorts of different feelings. It makes it easier for them to talk to you and to learn to cope with their emotions. You might not be able to fix what they're going through, but you can remind them that you're there to listen to them, hug them, and love them no matter what.

It is helpful for all adults who are looking after your older children at this time to try to talk to them in the same way about their baby brother or sister. This way everyone can work together to support them.

***"When my oldest climbed into bed and asked me what was wrong, I told her the truth: That I was really sad and that I wanted our whole family to be together at home... she looked at me with big sad eyes and said, "me, too."***