

Helping Children Cope When a Parent is in the Hospital

Families with young children or teens often worry about how their children will react when a family member is hospitalized or ill. Children often don't know what to expect, and they may imagine the worst. They may also have to be apart from their parents or need to stay with other family or friends. During this time, children often feel:

- **Loneliness:** They may miss their parent or caregiver.
- **Guilt:** They might think they caused the illness. Reassure them they didn't.
- **Fear:** They may worry about getting sick too, or that their parent might not come home.
- **Confusion:** Everyday routines are different, and they may not understand why.

How do I talk to my child about a parent's illness and hospital stay?

Every child and every situation is different. Here are some tips for talking with children and teens to help them understand and cope with the situation.

- **Plan your conversation:** Many parents find it helpful to practice or write down what they want to say about the diagnosis, procedure, or hospital stay before talking with their children.
- **Use simple words:** Give clear, age-appropriate explanations using words and ideas your child understands.
- **Be honest:** Answer your child's questions truthfully to correct any misunderstandings. If you don't know an answer, it's okay to say, "I don't know. I will try to find out and let you know." Children generally feel less anxious when they receive honest, age-appropriate information.

- **Give information slowly:** You don't have to share everything all at once. For younger children, share information in small doses and let them ask questions.
- **Explain the purpose:** Tell them that the operation or hospitalization is to help their parent. Use relatable explanations like, ““The doctors are giving medicine to help their body work better” or “The surgery will help their body do its job.” Discuss the treatment plan, possible side effects, and how it affects their lives.
- **Talk about time frames:** Explain the length of the hospital stay in simple terms, like “I will be gone for 2 nights.” Let them know if they can visit during the hospital stay.
- **Encourage expression:** Encourage your child to talk about the hospital visit, ask questions, and share their feelings. Some kids may not have a big response, and that's okay.
- **Offer reassurance:** Make sure your child knows that their parent's medical issue is not a punishment for anything they did wrong.
- **Acknowledge feelings:** Let them know their feelings are normal and okay. Understand that not all children can express their feelings with words (especially younger ones), and they might show their emotions through actions.
- **Accept their emotions:** Let them know it's okay to cry if they feel sad or scared, and that adults cry for the same reasons sometimes.

How do I help my child cope with illness and hospitalization?

- **Manage your own anxiety:** Kids can sense your feelings. Try to reduce your own fear and anxiety. Share healthy ways to cope, like deep breathing, walking, talking with family or friends, listening to music, or using stress balls.
- **Keep routines consistent:** Maintain regular routines, especially for younger children. Offer choices when you can and prepare them for any

changes in their day. For teenagers, respect their privacy, remind them it's okay to have fun, and reassure them that their responsibilities haven't changed.

- **Be patient and understanding:** Your child may go back to ways they behaved when they were younger, doing things like acting out, having trouble sleeping, or needing more attention. Be understanding and supportive.
- **Create special time:** Set aside private time for you and your child to give them special attention and support.
- **Use play and books:** Encourage your child to play with doctor kits or read books about hospitals. This can help them understand and cope with the situation better.
- **Seek extra support:** Consider reaching out to your child's school, counselor, pediatrician, or religious community for extra support. They can help check on how your child is doing and help you with any changes in behavior during this stressful time.
- **Express love and reassurance:** Let your child know they are loved. This reassurance is extremely important for their coping.
- **Take care of yourself:** Make sure you get enough rest, eat well, stay hydrated, and exercise. Connect with friends and family, express your emotions, keep a routine, and ask for help when needed. Your well-being is important for both you and your child.

How do I prepare my child for a hospital visit?

- **Talk about what to expect:** Before the visit, explain to your child what they might see, hear, smell, and feel in the hospital. Talk about how their parent might look different, or if they'll have tubes or bandages. Show them pictures of their parent and the hospital room if possible.
- **Set clear expectations:** Let your child know what they can and can't do with their parent during the visit. For instance, their parent may not be

able to walk with them, but they can hold hands, cuddle in bed, play games, watch movies, talk, or eat meals together.

- **Involve them in care:** Encourage your child to help with simple tasks like bringing a glass of water, fetching an extra blanket, pressing the call button, or adjusting the lights.
- **Provide breaks:** Let your child take breaks if the hospital room feels overwhelming. Visiting the waiting room, cafeteria, gift shop, or going for a walk can help them feel more at ease.
- **Bring activities:** Pack a bag of activities so your child can play and connect with their parent in the hospital.
- **Offer other ways to connect:** If in-person visits aren't possible, suggest other ways your child can connect with their parent, like phone calls, texts, video chats, writing letters, or drawing pictures to decorate their parent's room.

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