Helping your older children cope

You may wonder how you're going to help your children cope when you're having trouble coping yourself. And how will you find time for your other children when your baby needs you, too? There are a lot of things you can do to help your older children.

Common emotions of older children

Your children may have many different feelings during your baby's NICU stay. Encourage them to talk about their worries and to ask questions. Reassure them that their feelings are normal and that you sometimes feel the same way.

Older brothers and sisters of a baby in the NICU may feel:

- Confused over why the baby must stay in the hospital, or why you're so upset
- Angry over changes in daily routines and having to be away from you
- Jealous of the new baby, who is taking so much of your time
- Guilty because they feel angry toward the baby, and scared that these feelings caused the baby's condition
- Lonely because you're spending more time with the baby than with them
- Worried that the baby is suffering or will die

Behavior of older children

Your older children may start behaving differently during the baby's NICU stay. Some go back to behaviors that they've outgrown or that are common in younger children. Others may act out or even seem to reject you. By acting in these ways your children are telling you that they need you.

Here are some behaviors that your older children may have during your baby's stay in the NICU:

- Being very clingy
- Not listening well
- Being cranky
- Wetting themselves
- Drinking from a bottle again
- Sucking their thumb
- Having eating or sleeping problems
- Having problems at school, or with friends

This resource includes some medical terms you may hear in the NICU. You can find out what they mean in the *Words to know* section at the end of this resouce.

Ways you can help your older children

There are many things you can do to help your older children during your baby's NICU stay. These things can help reassure your children that you love them.

Be honest with them. Your older children may have a lot of questions but may not know how to ask them. Tell them what's going on with you and with their baby brother or sister in words they can understand. Here are some examples:

- The baby is too small or too sick to come home and has to stay in the hospital until he's bigger and stronger.
- You need to be away from home more than usual to be with the baby in the NICU.
- You may sometimes be upset or even cry because you're worried about the baby, but you're not upset over anything they did.

Try not to change your children's daily routine. This can help make the situation less stressful for them. When you can't be at home, ask a relative or other caregiver to take your children to the playground or do other things your children enjoy.

Calm your children's worries. Some children are scared that their parents will love them less now that the new baby is here. Tell your children that you love them very much and describe what makes them special. Make sure your children understand that they didn't do anything to make the baby sick. Some children are scared that they may need to go to the NICU if they get sick. Tell them that only sick babies need special care in the NICU, not big, strong children like them.

Let other caregivers know about your baby's NICU stay. Talk to your children's caregivers, such as day care providers and school teachers, about your baby's NICU stay. They can give your child additional support and let you know about any problems or behavior changes.

Including older children in their sibling's care

It's important for your children to become involved with their baby brother or sister from the start. The birth of a baby is a big event for the whole family, and you don't want your older children to feel left out.

Here are activities your children can do at home to help care for the baby while he's in the NICU:

- Color pictures to put up near the baby's bed.
- Pick a favorite photo of themselves or the family to have near the baby's bed.
- Choose a stuffed animal or other soft toy to take to the NICU.
- Put together a photo album of pictures of the baby.
- Create a story book about the birth of their baby brother or sister.
- Help get the nursery ready for when the baby comes home.

Preparing older children for the NICU

Many children can't wait to meet their new brother or sister. Each NICU has its own guidelines about siblings. Some NICUs only allow siblings who are over a certain age or allow visits during certain hours. Find out what the rules are in your NICU, then talk to your children before they go to the NICU about what they may see and hear.

Here's how you can prepare for their visits to the NICU:

Plan to keep visits short (less than 30 minutes). Some children may lose interest quickly. Make sure another adult is there to help with your children so you can stay with your baby after they leave.

Describe what they may see. Tell your children what the baby looks like, including how big she is. Describe your baby's bed and the equipment that's helping the baby. Show your children pictures or videos of the baby before they go to the NICU. Tell them that any tubes and wires attached to the baby don't hurt her.

Explain what equipment in the NICU does. Your children may find the machines in the NICU less scary if you tell them what some of them do. You can say things like:

- An incubator helps keep the baby warm and protects him from germs.
- A ventilator helps the baby breathe until his lungs get strong enough to breathe on their own.
- An IV gives the baby food to help him grow if he's too small or too sick to eat.

Also explain that some of the equipment is noisy, and alarms may go off to tell the doctors and nurses that a baby may need care.

Tell your children what they can do and how to behave in the NICU. Tell them:

- To wash their hands when they come into the NICU
- If they can hold the baby or if they need to wait until the baby is stronger
- If they have to stay by the baby's bed and be quiet or if they can play in a hospital playroom for siblings
- Who will take them home after seeing the baby

Talk to your children after they spend time in the NICU. Ask if they have any questions about the baby or the equipment. Answer their questions simply but honestly.

Notes

Words to know

incubator (IN-kyoo-bay-tur) — A clear plastic bed that helps keep your baby warm. You can touch your baby through holes (also called ports) in the sides of the incubator. Kinds of incubators are Giraffe® and Isolette®.

intravenous line (in-truh-VEE-nuhs line) — Also called IV. A tube inserted with a needle into your baby's vein. A vein is a blood vessel that brings blood back to the heart. Your baby can get fluids, medicine and blood through an IV.

IV — See intravenous line.

NICU — Also called the neonatal or newborn intensive care unit. The place in the hospital where newborns go for special care.

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