

HELPING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES COPE WITH HAVING A BABY IN THE NICU

DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



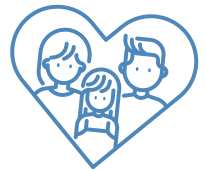
Having a baby in the NICU and other children at home poses challenges even when the world is not in the middle of a pandemic. Managing the additional stressor of COVID-19 can be extremely difficult for families with NICU babies.

Here are some ways you can **help your children at home cope with the double stressor of having a sibling in the hospital and the COVID-19 pandemic.** Many of the principles related to helping your older children cope with a baby in the NICU are the same ones that can help them cope with COVID-19.



DURING ANY TRAUMATIC SITUATION, SOME OF OUR MOST BASIC NEEDS MUST BE MET:

- **Coping with the unknown:** It's hard to feel safe when you don't know what will happen. This is true for both your baby's NICU stay and the COVID-19 pandemic. Coping with the unknown is incredibly stressful, but can be made more bearable by **talking about what we do have control over** - and sharing the burden together in loving and supportive relationships. This is true for children and adults.
- **Physical safety:** Explain that the reason that you can't visit the NICU together or as often is that the hospital is keeping things safer for the babies, families, and staff.



Remind your children that the baby is getting the care they need from professionals in the NICU.

Even though it's hard to be separated, the NICU is a safest place for the baby to be right now. Similarly, reassure your children that you and your family are all well and taking precautions to remain healthy. When the baby is ready to come home you will take care of them and the baby.

Explain to your children all the things you are doing to keep your family and our community safe, like washing our hands (for at least 20 seconds with soap and water), covering our coughs and sneezes, and staying home as much as we can. Remind children that if they get sick you will take care of them. Tell that that if you get sick people will help you.

- **Emotional safety:** A first and essential step involves sharing honest, accurate, and developmentally appropriate information about the NICU and about COVID-19.

Kids can generally sense when there's a secret and often will not talk about something they think is off limits. Giving them **information** and the **opportunity to ask questions** and **talk about their thoughts and feelings** allows them to understand what is and isn't happening.

When things are unknown or unsayable **children often fear the worst**. This is why they need to talk things through in a safe space with a loving and comforting caregiver. Even the youngest children can understand that the baby was born too early, with a problem that needs special attention (cardiac, or other surgical problem) and they need time and medical help to get well enough to come home.



If the baby is very sick, you can tell siblings that you're not sure what will happen but that the baby is getting everything they need to help them get better to get better. **Our job is to do everything we can to make sure the baby knows we love them** - no matter what happens.

Similarly, **provide information about COVID-19 that is based on facts**. Choose where you will receive your information (CDC, NIH, WHO, AAP) and share the information that helps your child understand the symptoms, transmission, and how to take preventive measures.

Check in with your children regularly to see how they are feeling and what new thoughts or questions they have about the NICU and COVID-19.



Your kids may need extra love, reassurance, patience, and gentleness right now. So will you. This is not easy. We will all have a hard time. It's ok if you're feeling angry, frustrated, and sad. It's also ok to have times when you feel happy. **Do what you can to be a little extra gentle with yourself and everyone around you during this difficult time.**

There are lots of ways to help your children at home feel connected to the new baby. Ask your NICU staff if there are ways to have virtual visits. **Ask if you can FaceTime with your baby from home** so your family can see, talk to, and read stories to the baby. The voices babies hear in utero can be comforting to them during the NICU stay.

Another option for older children is to **draw a picture** for the baby and send it to your NICU in a plastic ziploc bag (that can be disinfected as needed), or send **black and white photos** in plastic bags for the babies over 32 weeks to see their family members while helping with their eye development during this time.

