

Preparing Siblings for Their Brother's or Sister's Surgery & Orthopedic Treatment

WHAT ARE TYPICAL FEELINGS THAT SIBLINGS MIGHT EXPERIENCE WHEN THEIR BROTHER OR SISTER UNDERGOES SURGERY?

Loneliness: Surgery and treatment can cause separation between siblings, parents, and the patient. Siblings might miss having someone to play with or talk to and might miss having their parents to care for them. They might feel as though they are not important.

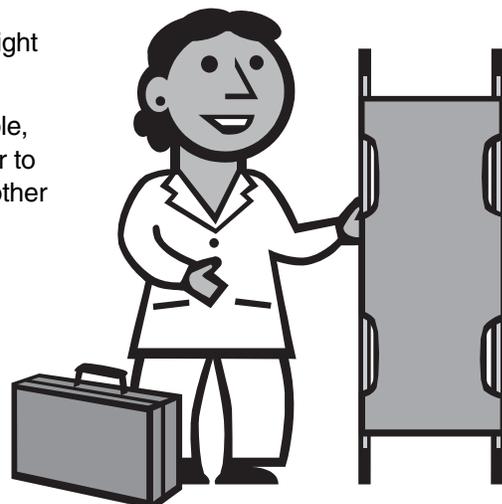
Fears of Being Left Alone: Siblings might fear that they will be left alone and might wonder who will be caring for them while their brother or sister is in the hospital.

Guilt: Siblings might feel some sense of responsibility for the surgery. For example, they might think that mean thoughts about the brother or sister caused him or her to undergo surgery. Siblings might feel guilty because they are healthy and their brother or sister is not.

Jealousy: Siblings might be jealous of the attention and special gifts that their brother or sister receives at the time of surgery or during treatment.

Embarrassment: Siblings might feel some embarrassment because their brother or sister requires surgery or has a physical disability.

General Fears: Siblings might fear that something "bad" will happen during surgery or that they will also be required to undergo surgery in the future.



HOW CAN I PREPARE SIBLINGS FOR THEIR BROTHER'S OR SISTER'S SURGERY?

Include siblings in conversations about surgery and encourage them to ask questions.

It is important that siblings understand why their brother or sister is going to the hospital and why surgery is needed.

Use terms that siblings can understand and be as specific as possible.

Be sure to talk about how their brother or sister will look after surgery and during treatment (e.g., will have a fixator on, will be using a wheelchair).

For example, "The surgery will help your brother's leg get longer so that he won't have to wear a special shoe." Be honest but appropriate. Reading books about hospitalization can also be helpful.

Assure siblings that the surgery is not their fault.

Siblings may be worried that mean thoughts or behaviors caused the surgery to happen. For example, a young sibling might believe that arguments with her brother about toys caused her brother's surgery. Remind siblings that surgery is not a punishment and that they did not do anything to cause it.

Validate the siblings' feelings.

Siblings might express feelings of fear, sadness, and anger about the surgery. Remember that all feelings are OK, and encourage them to talk about their feelings. They may need reassurance that the doctors will take good care of their brother or sister.

Assure siblings that they will be well cared for when their parents are at the hospital.

Talk to siblings about who will be caring for them in your absence. If possible, it might be helpful to offer them some choices as to who will provide care.



Arrange for the siblings to contact their brother or sister through phone calls or by mailing cards.

Most likely, siblings will want to help and to feel useful. Encourage them to make cards or to call when their brother or sister is in the hospital.

Prepare siblings for hospital visits.

Hospitals can be a frightening place for children. If possible, give siblings a choice about visiting the hospital. For some children, it may be easier for them to see their brother or sister after discharge. If they do choose to visit, talk with siblings about everything that they may see, hear, smell, etc., at the hospital. Also, prepare siblings for how their brother or sister might look after surgery and during treatment.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP SIBLINGS ADJUST AFTER THEIR BROTHER’S OR SISTER’S SURGERY?

Set aside “special time.”

Because much of the attention might be given to the child who underwent surgery, many siblings might feel left out or might experience feelings of jealousy. Therefore, it is important to regularly set aside time to spend with siblings. Schedule this time in advance and give siblings an opportunity to decide how the time is spent.

Catch siblings being good.

Take extra time to notice and to praise positive behaviors and accomplishments. Show your appreciation or your pride by frequently hugging, kissing, etc. Positive attention might help to prevent negative attention-seeking behaviors (e.g., acting out).

Try to maintain the normal routine at home as much as possible.

Try to minimize the impact of the surgery on siblings by keeping the care routine as consistent as possible.

Recognize that surgery and treatment can be stressful for all family members.

Children might show stress in different ways. Some common signs of stress include withdrawal, changes in appetite or sleep, attention-seeking behaviors, physical complaints (e.g., complaints of headaches or stomachaches), separation difficulties, changes in academic performance, frequent worrying, and irritability/mood swings. If you are concerned about a sibling, talk with your child’s pediatrician or to a psychologist.



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