



HAND to HOLD
Fragile Babies. Strong Support.

Answering Your Child's Questions About a Sibling in the NICU

Having a baby in the NICU is a difficult time in any parent's life.

Trying to balance your need to be with your baby in the NICU with responsibilities at home and work is challenging under the best circumstances. But when you have other young children at home, those challenges are multiplied. They need your time and attention, too. **One of the most valuable things we can offer our children in times of crisis is clear, consistent information.** Here are some of the most common questions your child may have and suggestions on how to answer.

WHY WAS MY BROTHER OR SISTER BORN EARLY? DID I CAUSE THIS?

It's common for siblings to worry that they caused the baby to be born early. They might think they said or did something that made this happen. Maybe they resented having to share their parents' attention. Perhaps they even wished the baby wasn't going to be born. These are typical, age-appropriate responses to a new sibling, but now that the baby is in the NICU, they need reassurance. Knowing it is not their fault is more important than knowing the medical reasons behind their sibling's early birth. **What to say,** This is not your fault or anybody else's fault. Sometimes babies come early, and sometimes babies get sick. Your parents and the doctors will do everything they can to help your sibling grow into a healthy baby.



ARE YOU MAD AT ME? DID I MAKE YOU SAD?

Because they know what they do affects how their parents feel, young children may assume that they have done or said something to make you unhappy. Explain that it is the situation – seeing the new baby so tiny and sick and not being able to bring the new baby home – and not them that makes you sad and upset. They also need to know that these feelings are temporary. **What to say,** We are not upset or angry at you. It makes me sad that the baby needs to be at the hospital instead of at home. It will get better, but it will take a little while. Sometimes we will feel happy. Sometimes we will feel sad. We will always love you and the baby.

WILL I "CATCH" WHAT THE BABY HAS?

You will want to reassure children that while some things, like viruses and germs, can be passed from one person to the next, the baby's illness isn't something that can be caught. **What to say,** The baby is in the hospital because that is the best place for them to grow and get healthy right now. We wash our hands and cover our sneezes to protect each other, but you never have to worry that you will be sick like the baby is sick.



IS THE BABY HURTING OR IN ANY PAIN?

Seeing a baby surrounded by machines, wires and needles can be scary for a child. Parents should acknowledge siblings' fears but should reassure them that the baby is being taken care of. Providing age-appropriate descriptions of medical procedures and equipment can help a sibling understand what is happening and what the baby might be feeling. **What to say,** The things the doctors and nurses are doing make the baby feel better, not worse. The tubes help give the baby food, air and medicine that will help them grow and become stronger. If they need to do something that might hurt a little – like getting a shot or taking a little blood – the doctors and nurses are very gentle and careful like when they help you.

WILL THE BABY EVER COME HOME? When babies are in the hospital for long periods of time, siblings may believe that they will stay there forever. Explain that the doctors and nurses are getting the baby ready to come home. It just may take time while the baby learns to eat and grow. **What to say,** When a baby is growing inside of its mom, her body gives it all the food, oxygen and protection it needs. When they're born, all babies need to learn how to do this on their own. When a baby is born early, it takes it a little longer to learn how to breathe and eat. The doctors and nurses are helping to teach the baby, and we'll help too when the baby is ready to come home.

WHO WILL TAKE CARE OF ME WHEN THE BABY COMES HOME? Young children worry they are not as important as the new baby because the baby needs so much care. They assume that when the baby comes home, they will always need this much attention. Reassure them that you will always take care of them. Encourage them to be proud of the things they can do independently. Explain that the baby can't do any of these things on their own yet. **What to say,** All new babies need someone to take care of them. You did. And mommy and daddy did, too. But they won't need this much time forever. Having a baby is going to add to the love we have for each other. When we all take care of each other, the love gets bigger, not smaller. We will always have enough love for everyone in our family.

REMEMBER

- Your children need to be told – and shown – how important they are.
- Carve special time out of the day to spend with older children alone, such as during the baby's nap time.
- Celebrate your older children and their unique qualities.
- Incorporate them into the family's daily routines.
- Help them find a role that fits their talents.
- Give them responsibilities that make them feel competent and proud.
- Be sure to stress the things that he or she can do that their baby brother or sister can't.

MOST IMPORTANTLY, tell your children that we all need to learn how to ask for help when we need it. Let them know that if they are feeling sad or like they need some special time alone with you, to tell you. Show them that they can depend on you and the other adults who love them.

For more information check out www.handtohold.org



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