

# How to Prepare a Child for a Visit to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit



**When you have a child that is in the hospital it can be a difficult time for everyone in the family, especially the siblings.**

Often children will want to come to the hospital because they know their brother or sister is there and they want to see them. It is typically okay to have your other children come and visit their sibling in the hospital if you feel it is appropriate. If your child is properly prepared for the hospital visit, then you can help make visiting a positive experience for the child and yourself.

- When preparing your child for a visit to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU), it's important to do the preparing in a quiet/safe place such as being at home or a quiet room in the hospital. Try to make it free from distractions. Make sure the phone and TV are turned off and that there are not too many people around them.
- You need to prepare your child for what they will see and hear when they come to the hospital. The older the child, the more details you may have to give your child. It is okay to go into as many details as you think is appropriate. Take pictures of hospital room, the machines, and the child that is in the hospital. Explain to them in simple details what every machine is used for:
  - The computer on the wall is monitoring your brother's heart.
  - The pole with the bag of water is helping to give your brother's body a drink through a little tube in his hand. This tube can also help give your brother medicine.
  - There is a tube that is in your brother's nose and that is to help give him food because he is not awake enough to eat right now.



- There is a tube in your brother's mouth and that is helping him to breath. The doctor is giving your brother some medicine that makes him really sleepy so his brain can rest. When his brain is resting, the doctor has this big machine to help your brother breath. The machine makes a little noise when it works. Sometimes it will beep. It's okay when it beeps because the nurse and doctor are watching the computer to make sure everything is working well.
- Make sure you leave the decision up to the child about if they want to visit or not. Some children want to visit and some of them don't. Some children want to wait a few more days and then want to visit. It should be the child's decision.
- Explain to the child in appropriate language why their sibling may not respond the way they usually do. Let them know that even though they may look different, it is still sister/brother on the inside. Remind them that they can talk to them but they may/may not be able to talk back.
- Let your child know that they will not be able to "catch" the illness that their sibling has. Often time's children can not differentiate between illnesses. Make sure you clarify this for them prior to visiting. **If they can catch the illness, then they should not be visiting.**
- When you bring the child to the room, let them lead you. They may want to stay back and walk in slowly. Do not tell your child to go up to the bed and hold the sibling's hand. Let your child know that they can come up and hold their hand if they want to or they can stay back farther. If your child decides to go into the room, have your child make a card ahead of time and then they can give it to their sibling. This can help the child feel like they have a 'job' in the room.
- Keep the visit short per the child. If they feel comfortable staying, allow them to. If they want to leave sooner than expected, that's okay. For some children it may be a lot to take in all at once, so be prepared that they may want to leave after a short time.
- After a child sees someone they love in the hospital, it may bring about some emotions. Acknowledge the child's emotions and let them know that it is okay to feel this way. Let them know that it is okay to cry if they want to. Also let them know it's okay to be happy. Do not say to a child "Try to be brave and try not to cry." Crying is a means of coping.



If you know that your child in the hospital is going to look better in the next few days, we suggest you have the siblings wait to see them until they start looking better (especially if they are a lot of tubes, swelling, etc). If you know that the child will not look better and may die, then you should prepare your other children and ask them if they want to visit and say goodbye.



If you have questions, contact Child Life.

(920) 433-8641

[childlife@hshs.org](mailto:childlife@hshs.org)