

Supporting Your Child Through Their Sibling's Care

This information explains how you can help your child through their sibling's diagnosis and treatment.

When one of your children is sick, the whole family is affected. It can be especially hard for your other children. They may worry about their sibling, feel stressed about changes to their family's daily routine, or feel as if they're getting less attention. Helping your children may be challenging as you cope with your own emotions and responsibilities.

The information in this resource can help you begin to understand your child's feelings. It offers strategies to support you as you support your children. You may also find it helpful to ask for support from someone you and your child can depend on. You can find a list of support services in the "Resources for You and Your Family" section of this resource.

Understanding Your Child's Feelings

Every child reacts to a sibling's diagnosis differently. Here are some feelings your child may have and what you can do to help.

- **Sadness:** Your child may feel lonely and sad. This may be because of changes in their family routine and being separated from you and their sibling during appointments or treatment. It can be helpful to do things to make your child feel special. When you remind them you're thinking about them and love them, it can help them manage these feelings.
- **Worry:** Your child may worry about their sibling's overall health. Encourage open and honest conversations around their sibling's health.

Let your child express their concerns and ask questions. This can help create an environment where they feel supported and know their questions can be answered.

- **Anxiety:** Your child may feel anxious about what the family is going through. There may be a lot of unexpected changes to their lives and daily routine. Try to keep to their normal routine as best you can, but also prepare them for any expected changes. Explain to them how things may be different and what they may need to do in the coming weeks. This can help reduce anxiety and uncertainty about the future.
- **Anger:** Children often express their emotions through anger. Your child can feel angry when they see their sibling getting more attention. They can be angry when you spend less time with them to focus on their sibling's medical needs. Encourage your child to talk about how they're feeling. This can help them process their anger in a healthy way with you or a trusted adult.
- **Pain:** It can be hurtful for your child to see changes in their family or their sibling have side effects of treatment. They may also notice how you're reacting to their sibling's diagnosis and treatment, which can affect their own feelings. It's normal to want to avoid hard conversations with your child. But talking with them about what you're all experiencing can help them express their own feelings.
- **Jealousy:** Your child may feel left out, or that their sibling is spending more time with you. It can be helpful to set aside some time to spend alone with each child. This way, all your children spend time alone with you and don't compete for your attention.
- **Guilt:** Your child may feel guilty for having negative feelings towards their sibling or their family. Talk with them about the different emotions they may be feeling. Remind them that it's normal to feel them, which can help reduce their guilt.
- **Confusion:** Children often feel confused when a sibling is sick. They may wonder why their sibling is sick and they are not. They may wonder if they'll get the same illness themselves. They may feel they had a role in causing the sibling's illness. Be sure to reassure them this is not true.

Being honest and direct with your child can help them better understand what's happening and make them less confused.

- **Frustration:** Family routines and responsibilities may change as your child starts their treatment. All family members will need to adjust to these changes. Siblings may feel frustrated with these changes and wish they can do more to help their sibling. Support your children as they adapt to change and transition. This can help them manage their frustration and feelings of uncertainty.

These feelings are normal. But there are times when getting support from a therapist or other provider can be helpful or even necessary. Watch to see if your child shows emotions that get in the way of their social, emotional, or physical well-being. They may say their head or stomach hurts. They may behave younger than their age, wetting the bed or sucking their thumb. If you have concerns or are unsure about next steps, talk with your social worker or your MSK Kids care team.

Supporting Your Child

Your child's response to their siblings' diagnosis and treatment will depend on their age and understanding of the situation. They will react to how people close to them are coping. Here are some ways you can help your child understand and cope with their sibling's diagnosis.

Be open and honest

You may want to protect your child and make them feel their sibling will be OK. But it's important to avoid lying or making a promise you can't keep. That can be even more confusing. Open and honest communication will help your child trust you. It also helps them feel less alone with their thoughts and feelings during a confusing time. It's OK to not know all the answers, and you can be honest about not knowing.

Validate their feelings

Let your child know that how they feel is OK. Help them express their feelings through art, play, or another activity. This will help them cope with their emotions. Talk with your child about how you're feeling too. Tell them that you also feel sad and scared. Explain how you cope. Your child may share that they are feeling "fine" or don't have feelings about their sibling's diagnosis at all. Keep telling your child you're here to support them.

Encourage them to ask questions and speak honestly

Your child may have questions about what their sibling is experiencing, and why they're going through this. You may feel worried about your child's reaction to talking about their sibling's diagnosis. It's important to let them know they can ask questions. Do your best to answer them honestly. Letting your child ask questions will help them feel comfortable talking with you. Answering honestly will help your child understand what's really happening. It will stop them from creating their own false ideas about this situation. Your care team can help you get ready to talk with your child.

Spend time with them

Change can make your child feel sad and alone. Try to spend some alone time with them so they feel safe and supported. Take a drive or a walk, or play a game. Your child may have their own ideas of what they'd like to do.

Ask them for help

Help your child feel involved and valued by asking them for their help. They can help you pick toys to take to the hospital for their sibling. This will also help your children stay connected if they can't be together. If possible, have your child visit their sibling in the hospital. This can help them understand what the hospital is and what happens there.

Talk to their teachers and coaches

If your child is in school, tell their teachers about their sibling's diagnosis. This can help your child feel supported there too. A teacher or counselor can help your child express their feelings during the day. You may also want to talk to members of social groups that your child is a part of, such as coaches, instructors, or religious figures. It will be difficult to adjust to change. Building a network of support will help.

Take care of yourself

The best thing you can do for your child is to take care of yourself. Identify someone you feel comfortable talking to, even if you're not sure what to say. Creating a support system for you and your family is important.

Resources for You and Your Family

MSK support

Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) has many resources to support you and your family. For more information about the programs listed in this section, talk with your social worker or child life specialist.

MSK Kids Support Services

www.mskcc.org/pediatrics/experience/life-pediatrics/support-services-care-teams

MSK Kids' support services and care teams can help you navigate your child's diagnosis and treatment throughout their care. They're here to help support your family and can provide help, counseling, and resources. Talk with your care team about getting support for you and for your family.

Help for caregivers

www.mskcc.org/caregivers

Taking care of yourself will help you take better care of your family. Resources and support are available to help manage the responsibilities that come with caring for a child going through treatment. For support resources and information, read *A Guide for Caregivers* (https://sandbox18.mskcc.org/pe/guide_caregivers).

Talking with Children About Cancer program

www.mskcc.org/experience/patient-support/counseling/talking-with-children

Talking with Children About Cancer is a program to help support adults receiving cancer treatment as they parent their children and teenagers. But they can also help you talk with your child about their siblings' treatment. Our social workers offer family support groups, individual and group counseling, connections to resources, and guidance for professionals in the community including school social workers, school psychologists, guidance counselors, teachers, and school staff.

More resources

Here are some resources that may help your child as their sibling gets treatment.

Helpful books

A Day with Dr. Waddle

Author: Center for Basic Cancer Research

Ages 7 to 10

Because...Someone I Love Has Cancer

Author: American Cancer Society

Ages 5 to 11

Drums, Girls & Dangerous Pie

Author: Jordan Sonnenblick

Ages 10 to 13

Oliver's Story- For "Sibs" of Kids with Cancer

Author: Michael Dodd

Ages 3 to 8

Sort of Forever

Author: Sally Warner

Ages 8 to 12

Staying Afloat

Authors: Suzanne Kornblatt, LMSW and Joanna Formont, LMHC with Arlene Basner, MA, Joan Perkell, LCSW, and Diane Silver, MA
All ages. This book is a guide for parents and siblings to use together to cope with hard feelings.

What About Me, When Brothers and Sisters Get Sick
Author: Allen Peterkin, MD
Ages 3 to 8

Community support

CancerCare

800-813-4673

www.cancercare.org

This organization provides counseling, support groups, educational workshops, publications, and financial help.

Red Door Community

212-647-9700

www.reddoorcommunity.org

A place where people living with cancer find social and emotional support through networking, workshops, lectures, and social activities. Red Door Community used to be called Gilda's Club.

Alex's Lemonade Stand

www.alexlemonade.org/childhood-cancer/for-families/supersibs

A nonprofit foundation that provides many support services for children with cancer and their families. They offer a sibling-specific program, called SuperSibs!

Sunrise Day Camp

<https://sunrisedaycamp.org>

A day camp for children and young adults ages 3 ½ to 16 living with cancer and their siblings.

SIBS PLACE®

516-374-3000

<https://sibsplace.org>

This is a free program for children ages 5 to 17 who have a parent or sibling with cancer. They offer peer support and creative arts activities.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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