

After the Hospital: Helping My Child Cope

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

When children are seriously ill or injured, and have to stay in the hospital, they and their families may feel upset or worried. These feelings are common and can continue after they return home. In addition, children and parents may wonder how they will cope without the support of hospital staff. Some families may also have difficulty readjusting to daily routines.

What should I expect in the days and weeks after the hospital? After being in the hospital, it is also common for some children to have minor changes in behavior. A few children and parents keep thinking about the experience and get upset frequently. Sometimes they also try to avoid places (such as the hospital) and things that remind them of it. These reactions usually get better with time, understanding, and support.

Other common (temporary) reactions after coming home from the hospital:

In younger children:

- Clinging to parents or other adults
- Bed wetting or thumb sucking
- Being afraid of the dark

In older children and teens:

- Changes in sleeping and eating
- Being easily startled or jumpy
- Complaints of headaches or bellyaches, or other minor illnesses

In parents:

- Worrying a lot more about their child being safe
- Being overprotective or “on guard,” even when there’s no need
- Getting upset at reminders of what happened, especially if their children are in pain or discomfort
- Feeling anxious about caring for their child’s medical needs on their own



Signs that your child may need extra help:

- Watching out for danger all the time
- Having new fears
- Not wanting to go to school, or doing a lot worse in school
- Not wanting to be with friends or go back to usual activities
- Arguing a lot with friends or family

When and where should I get extra help for my child? Most children and families feel better within a few days or weeks. (See tips for parents on other side.) Some injuries and illnesses have behavior changes associated with them, so it’s important to talk to your doctor as well. If your child’s reactions last longer, seem to get worse, or get in the way of day-to-day activities, see your doctor or a school counselor.

Eight Ways You Can Help Your Child Cope After Being in The Hospital



- 1 Go back to everyday routines.** Normal routines help children feel safe. Help your child go back to doing his/her usual activities—as much as the injury or illness allows.
- 2 Be patient and give everyone time to readjust.** Keep in mind that people in the same family can react in different ways. Brothers and sisters can feel upset too. Most family members just need time and reassurance that things are returning to normal.
- 3 Set normal limits.** You may be tempted to relax the rules in order to help your child feel special, or to make up for the hard times that he or she is experiencing. However it is often better for your child if you set normal limits on behavior and keep most of your family rules and expectations the same.

4 Allow your children to talk about feelings and worries, if they want to. For younger children, encourage play, drawing, and story-telling. Ask your child (and brothers and sisters) what they are thinking, feeling, and imagining. Be a good listener—and share the facts, as well as your feelings and reactions.

5 Encourage your child to spend time with friends. After a serious illness or injury, some children feel a little “different.” They may also wonder how their friends will react. Invite a few of your child’s friends to visit, and help your child plan a few fun activities. It may be helpful to assist your child in answering questions his or her friends may have about the illness or injury (Is it contagious? How long will the bandages be on? etc.)

6 Help your child do some things on his or her own. It is often tempting to do things for your child after he or she is injured or ill. But it is more helpful for children to do things again on their own. As much as the injury or illness allows, encourage your child to do the things (including chores) he or she used to do.

7 Take time to deal with your own feelings. It will be harder to help your child if you are feeling really worried, upset, or overwhelmed. Talk about your feelings with another adult, such as a friend, your doctor, a counselor, or a member of the clergy.

8 Follow up with the doctor. Even if your child is getting better, the doctor needs to know how your child is coping, especially since some injuries and illnesses have behavior changes associated with them. For children and families who need extra help dealing with their reactions, helpful treatments are available. Your doctor will be able to help you figure out what’s best for you and your family.



Developed by the Medical Traumatic Stress Working Group of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.