

- When visiting NICU with them talk to the baby about his/her siblings and relate baby's sounds or movements to the siblings to enhance the connection.
- If possible, encourage them to talk and touch their baby brother or sister, reinforcing the family unit and enhancing bonding.
- Discuss the visit with them after they leave. Encourage open expression of feelings. They may hesitate to ask questions as they feel very protective of their parents and fear causing you further sadness.
- Spend time looking through photos of the sibling as a baby (talking about differences and similarities between them and the new baby).



## NICU rules

- Siblings should be healthy: no fever, colds, diarrhoea, vomiting, coughing or sneezing when visiting the new baby.
- They shouldn't have had exposure to infectious diseases such as chickenpox or roseola.
- They must wash their hands before contact to avoid bring germs into NICU.
- Explain how loud noises can affect baby and the importance of being quiet. Babies need lots of sleep so they can grow and get well enough to go home.
- Siblings should be supervised during the visit. It is best to have two adults when a child is visiting, to avoid the risk of them touching buttons on nearby equipment.
- Children should remain at the bedside of their own sibling, and not be allowed to wander or run around the nursery.

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# Big brothers and sisters

Supporting siblings to understand what is happening when your new baby is on the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)

**After months of waiting, your baby has arrived, but things haven't exactly gone as expected and he/she is already proving him/herself to be a strong fighter! What a hero!**



However stressful this may be, it is important not to forget your other children's needs.

Your baby may be cared for in NICU for several weeks and this may affect your older children in different ways.

Siblings often experience strong and unique thoughts, emotions and reactions in response to this situation. They will require information, encouragement and support in adjusting to the family routine.

Children are quick to distinguish when all is not well with their parents and if not given answers, they may begin to imagine things which aren't true or accurate.

### **Some children may feel:**

- Insecure and left out of their new brother/sister's life. Feeling that nobody is paying them any attention may make them feel jealous.
- Anger towards their parents for not protecting their brother or sister; or perhaps scared their parents will not be able to stop them from also getting sick.
- Guilty that they are healthy and happy not to be in hospital or because they think they caused it. Some children may believe that their negative and secret thoughts may have caused baby's illness – for example, because they did not want a new brother or sister.
- Angry with their new brother or sister for arriving too early or for getting sick.

### **This may result in:**

- Playing up to get attention or becoming quiet and withdrawn with mood swings.
- Trouble eating or sleeping or getting into trouble in school.
- Returning to common behaviours from when they were younger (regression), for example, thumb sucking, bed wetting or carrying a security toy or blanket.

### **Ways to promote bonding:**

- Talk with them. Be honest about what is happening. The whole experience can be made easier for them when they understand what is going on around their new brother or sister. Involve them in the baby's progress by giving simple updates.
- Reassure them that baby's illness isn't their fault.
- Maintain the household routine as much as possible.
- Before visiting NICU it is important to prepare them for the NICU environment by talking about and showing them pictures of the baby and describe how the unit looks and sounds, and how the equipment is helping the baby. Give them an idea of baby's size by comparing the baby to a doll or soft toy.
- Help them to choose a toy or family photo to put in the baby's cot/incubator. Encourage them to make a drawing or leave a message for the baby.

