



## Helping my child cope after hospital: What parents and caregivers can do

When a child is seriously ill or injured, and has to stay in 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 hospital, it is common for some children to have minor changes in behaviour. A few children and parents keep thinking about the experience and frequently get upset. Sometimes they also try to avoid places (such as the hospital) and things that remind them of hospital. 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 tummy aches, or other minor illnesses.

#### In parents:

- worrying a lot more than usual 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 child is in pain or discomfort
- feeling anxious about caring on their own for their child’s medical needs.

### 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 to 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 weeks. Some injuries and illnesses have behaviour changes associated with them, so it's important to talk to your doctor or school counsellor if your child's reactions last longer, seem to get worse, or get in the way of day-to-day activities.

## Ways you can help your child cope after being in hospital

- 1. Go back to everyday routines.** Normal routines help children feel safe. Help your child go back to doing their 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 they are experiencing. However it is often better for your child if you set normal limits on behaviour and keep most of your family rules and expectations unchanged.
- 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 help your child practice answering questions their 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 their own.** It is often tempting to do things for your child after they are injured or ill. 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) they 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 counsellor, or a representative from pastoral care.
- 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 behaviour 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.

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