



Explaining Your Baby's Diagnosis to Siblings

How to help your kids understand and prepare for your baby's birth

How will we tell our kids?

Giving kids simple, honest information is the best way to support their coping. This information can help you prepare them for your baby's birth and hospital stay. Kids will range in how much they are able to understand. Finding out what your child already knows about the diagnosis can give you a place to start.

What should we say?

Start with very basic information. For example, you could say, "Most of the time when a brother or sister is born, everything is fine. Sometimes, they can be sick. Your brother or sister has _____. They may need to stay in the hospital. They may need to have surgery. They may need special doctors or medicine." You know best what your kids need. Talk to them in a way they can understand. Encourage them to ask questions and talk about their feelings.

Child Life Specialists can help you find kid-friendly ways to talk about complicated medical information. They can be reached at (513) 636-8855.

What should we expect?

Kids need time to take in the information they receive. They may only be able to handle small amounts of information at a time. You will likely need to have more than one conversation with your kids. In your first conversation:

- Allow them to take breaks to play when talking about the baby. This is how kids learn.
- Know that some kids may ask many questions, but others may seem quiet or distracted.
- Be ready to correct mistakes in thinking about what will happen with the baby.

After the first conversation, you might notice:

- When playing, many kids like to pretend to be doctors. This is healthy and normal. It can help them cope when their brother or sister is sick. You can play with them if you'd like. Giving them a doll with a toy doctor's kit can be a great way to play.
- Changes in their usual behavior are normal stress reactions in younger kids. This may include bed-wetting, thumb sucking, or acting out. If you are worried about their behavior, talk to their doctor.
- Some kids may feel like they caused their brother or sister's illness. It is important that they are told it is not their fault.



How can we help prepare them for the hospital stay?

Explain to your kids that the baby will not be coming home right away.

Find out about the sibling visitation policy for the unit of the hospital where your baby will be staying. Different units have different rules for sibling visitation. During the winter, special rules for flu season may be in place.

Before visiting the baby, you can show your kids pictures of the hospital and any tubes or machines they may see. The Child Life Specialists may have pictures you can use. Bringing another adult that your kids are comfortable with, like a family member or close friend, can be helpful. This person can bring siblings in for a short visit and focus on their needs when you are busy with the baby.

If siblings will not be able to visit with baby at the hospital, the unit's Child Life Specialist can help your family stay connected and supported throughout your baby's hospital stay.

Ways to follow up with your kids:

- Ask your kids to describe their brother's or sister's diagnosis. Check in to see if they have questions.
- Check in regularly to ask your kids about their feelings. Ask them for ideas about how to cope with difficult feelings like being sad or scared.
- See if your kids can describe how the diagnosis may affect your baby in the coming weeks or months. If your baby has a chronic condition, ask your kids what they think it means for your baby's future.
- See if your kids have ideas about how they would like to show love and support for their new sibling. For example, they might want to draw a picture or sing a song.

These ideas can help you see what your kids understand about your baby's condition and how they are feeling. If you would like more help talking to your kids about your baby, you can reach out to:

- Your social worker at the Cincinnati Fetal Center. Please call (513) 636-9608 and ask to speak to the social worker.
- The Cincinnati Children's Child Life Specialists. Please call (513) 636-8855 and ask to speak to a Child Life Specialist.