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SIBLING REACTIONS

Here is a sampling of the reactions written by siblings:

“If I’m mean to him, then I feel bad because he’s sick.”

“We haven’t argued since she got sick. I try to keep her happy.”

“Sometimes he’s mean to me. He can get away with it because I feel okay and he doesn’t.”

A brother drew three balloons.

Inside the first balloon he wrote, “Too much . . . Mad, Sad, Upset, Angry, Jealous, Envy.”

Inside the second balloon he wrote, “Too much” and drew pictures of balloons, flowers, and presents.

Inside the third balloon he wrote, “Too much” and drew pictures of pills, medicine bottles, and a syringe.

Beside the balloons there is a cartoon face with a tear on the cheek and an open mouth exclaiming, “Ohh!”

A sister wrote after the phrase “I feel”:

“Uncomfortable when she and my family gets upset, mad, sad, etc.”

“Left out. She gets a lot of attention, gifts, cards, etc.”

“Sad, for she is my only sister.”

“Happy that she is in remission.”

“Mad because it splits our family up for a little.”

WAYS TO HELP YOUR OTHER CHILDREN

How can you help your other children when you are feeling overwhelmed and pulled in a million directions?

These five words can be a guide:

Empathize

Explain

Include

Listen

Delegate

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When you **empathize** with your other children about what is hard for them (that you are away, that they have to miss an extracurricular activity or can't meet up with friends), you are letting them know you understand and are sorry about it, too. They are not alone in their disappointment.

When you **explain** to them in age-appropriate ways what is wrong with your other child and why you need to be with her, you are removing the mystery from the situation. At the same time, you can make the point that if one of them had got sick, you would be doing the same for each of them.

When you **include** your other child in your child's care (be it visiting the hospital, meeting the medical staff, seeing the hospital playroom, or if the hospital is too far away, talking to your sick child on the telephone or Skyping, sending cards or emails, bringing home your sick child's homework), you are allowing your other child to feel useful and included.

When you **listen** to your other child— on the telephone, by Skype, Facetime, or face-to-face— you can learn a lot. You can get hints about what is on her mind from what she says and from what she does not say. She may tell you directly what is worrying her or she may avoid discussing a subject that you know must bother her and may need your help to bring it up. She may show you directly what she understands or misunderstands about what is going on or she may need you to ask. After your child gets home from the hospital, you will see how all your children are dealing with one another and will know whether you need to intervene. Are your other children being mean or too nice to your sick child— or are they treating one another as roughly as they did before the illness or accident? Maybe you will need to let a brother know that it is not okay for the sick child to hit him, and reassure him that the reason his sister is being so mean is not because of anything that he has done but because she is feeling sick and fed up. Assure your other child that you too regret how things have changed and you appreciate the sacrifices that he has had to make (missing after-school activities, staying with grandparents, whatever the sacrifices may be) in the process, by saying whatever you need to let him know you understand that this is hard for him, too.

When you **delegate** to others what you are unable to do on your own (having your other children do a weekly activity with a special friend, having them join SuperSibs through the Alex's Lemonade Stand website,⁶ or getting someone to bring them to the hospital for sibling programs or to meet with a psychosocial clinician), you are showing your other children that you care about them and they are special too. Your other children can benefit greatly from learning they are not alone and that other siblings are being faced with similar challenges.

If your hospital runs sibling programs, I encourage you to use them. I cannot overemphasize how valuable group activities are for brothers and sisters—and how many brothers and sisters I have seen helped by their participation. Brothers and sisters go through a hard time, too, and even though you may do your best to empathize, inform, include, and listen, delegating some of the work may be invaluable. Delegating to individuals and groups who are skilled in providing brothers and sisters with opportunities to share with each other, to express themselves, to brainstorm about what helps during this tough time for the family, is a great gift you can give your other children.

And if such programs do not exist in your hospital, you can advocate for them, while trying to keep in mind the financial and staff constraints that may exist. You can always enroll your child as a SuperSib through Alex's Lemonade Stand.¹¹ Perhaps you can see if you can adapt some of the ideas developed here to your own situation. Perhaps you can make your own Sibling Week during your other children's school vacation weeks and you or a friend or relative can bring them into the clinic on your child's clinic day for their special time to meet with your child's doctor and look around the clinic. You can also help

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them plan special questions to ask the doctors or nurses. By doing such things you will help your other children feel included and recognized.