

Helping Children Cope with the Serious Illness of a Family Member...



Young children can have a hard time understanding illness and disease. Because they can really only understand what they can observe with their senses, it is very difficult for them to understand the biology of the body and how illness effects the person. The child may feel responsible for the family member's illness and may question whether they, too, will become ill.

When someone in the child's family is seriously ill, whether it is physical or mental, the whole family is thrown off balance and the child's life changes. It is a challenge to meet the needs of the sick member and keep the healthy child's life as stable and normal as possible. This is where the child care provider can step in and take a supportive role.

Encourage the family to keep you informed about what is going on with the child, as well as the family member that is ill. Find out what the family has told the child and be consistent with your explanations when the child asks you for information about the illness.

HOW TO RESPOND WITH THE CHILD

- **Reassure the child he did nothing to make the person sick.** Puppets are a great way for the child to voice this concern and help the child express their feelings.
- **Make the child feel special and important.** The child may feel forgotten or unimportant at home. Making the child feel special and important in your environment can help the child. Make the child your special helper, ask his or her opinion, and engage in play.
- **The child could draw pictures or dictate stories for the ill person.** Provide the child with materials and offer to dictate his or her stories. This helps the child feel important because it is a tangible task. It also aids the child in communicating with the sick person.
- **Talk about how all living things change.** Point out changes in trees, flowers, and growing plants. Cut out and paste pictures of changes in nature. Collect pictures of how people change as they grow and develop. Discuss people's feelings about change and stress the fact that some changes we have control over, some we do not.
- **Plan activities about feelings.** Invite the child to talk about what she is feeling. Let the child know that you respect their feelings and offer outlets for anger such as clay, messy art, and outdoor play.
- **Encourage dramatic play.** This is one way for children to "talk about" and come to terms with difficult situations. Provide plenty of opportunities to engage in socio-dramatic play. Provide props such as doctor's kits and dress-up clothes worn by doctors, nurse, or hospital workers.
- **Offer puppets of doctors, nurses, and other community helpers.** This can help the child recreate scenes from life and imagination.

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- **Provide children with doll house-size people and furniture that could represent hospital equipment.** Children can be encouraged to express their feeling as they play.
- **Encourage family to give the child as much *factual* information as the child can understand.** You may be able to help the family with this by providing accurate information about how children develop. Stress to the family that without correct and real information, the child can imagine that things are much worse than they really are.
- **Involve the child.** If the ill family member is being cared for at home, allow the child to be involved in appropriate ways of caring for the person. The child can bring the person food or add a pillow to make the person feel comfortable. This will allow the child to feel valued and important.
- **Prepare the child.** The family should prepare the child if the family member that is ill might die. Ask the family to let you know if they have done so. Children can sense that something is terribly wrong by the tension, visitors and phone calls. If they are not told the facts, in ways they can understand, they may feel more anxious. Children need to know that they will be told when important things are happening in their lives.
- **The family should prepare the child for the experience of visiting a seriously ill person in the hospital.** Children should not be forced or coerced in visiting the hospital. In the classroom teachers can show children's books about hospitals and doctors offices.
- **Help the child get noticed in positive ways.** Provide parents with positive reports, notes, and artwork. This can help the whole family feel positive about things in general.
- **Promote friendships in the classroom.** Provide activities for the child to interact with their peers to strengthen the child's social realms and help the child feel important in their environment.
- **Provide security and predictability.** The child's home life may be very unpredictable and unsettling during this time. The child needs a sense of security and predictability while in your care.
- **Play and have fun.** Allow and encourage the child to enjoy him or herself as much as possible.
- **Offer acceptance.** The child needs to know that you accept him or her and the child doesn't need to feel ashamed. The parent may not be able to nurture the child as much as they would like during this time, but you can be a substitute for the parent and help the child feel valued and loved.



Adapted from *The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers: How to Handle the Really Difficult Problems* by Karen Miller, 2002.