

## Visiting a parent in hospital

When a sudden health event happens, adults may instinctively want to protect children by not talking about what has happened. However, if the injured person is a close relative, such as a parent, the child will need to know at least a few basic details.

When a parent is in hospital it's natural for a child to ask questions about where the person has gone and when they will be coming home. Very young children will not be able to comprehend what has happened but will be sensitive to changes in the environment, whereas older children and teenagers will have a better understanding and may ask more direct questions.

The information in this feature is intended to help you make the decision on whether to allow a child to visit a sick parent or close relative in hospital, as well as how to prepare the child for the visit.

## Making the decision to visit

Has the child actually expressed any thoughts about visiting? If so, have they asked to go or stated that they do not want to? At this stage, anything the child says that demonstrates their wishes or fears should be taken into account when making a decision.

Prior to arranging a visit, ensure that the child understands and accepts the information that they have been told so far. You may have to repeat the information on several occasions to ensure that they properly understand and are confident in their decision about visiting.



## Preparing for the visit

- Speak to the staff on the unit in advance to ask for their help or input when the child visits. There may be staff that are trained to help children through their first visit, and they may be able to suggest a time when the unit is calmer than usual.
- Speak to the child's teacher at school so that they are aware of the circumstances and can help if needed.
- Explain what the unit is like to the child so that they are prepared for the sight of machines and lots of noise. If their parent will be acting differently (e.g. being asleep, being confused, having difficulty remembering things) it is helpful to prepare children for this in advance.
- If the parent has any physical injuries such as swelling, scars or tubes attached to them, discuss this with your child first to help reduce shock or fear.
- Consider showing the child a photograph of their parent in hospital to prepare them for how their parent may look.
- Agree on a 'code word' with the child in advance; this code word can then be used during the visit if at any point the child wishes to leave.
- Reassure the child that they can change their mind at any time. If they get to the hospital and change their mind, allow them to wait for a while. They may or may not decide to go in, but either way, support them with their decision.

## Visiting the parent

- Before entering the unit, ask to speak to a member of staff on your own. Seek an update on the parent's condition so that this does not need to be done in front of the child. You should also check with staff that it is still appropriate for the child to go in, as the situation may have changed since you last spoke with them.
- Try to maintain a calm manner to help with reassuring the child. They will need to feel a sense of security around them, and if they are made aware of your anxiety they may become more fearful.
- Take a trusted friend or relative to support you. They can also sit with the child in the waiting area if needed, such as if you want some time alone at the parent's bed-side or if the child is uncomfortable in the unit. If this is not possible, ask for a member of staff to help you.
- Encourage the child to talk to their parent, and after checking with staff suggest that they hold their parent's hand.
- If the child becomes upset and can't be comforted with gentle reassurance, allow them to leave the unit for either a 'short break' or to visit another time.
- Limit the initial visit to 5-15 minutes (depending on the child and their age). This will ease them into the situation, as spending too much time on a ward can be overwhelming for anyone, especially during a first visit.
- Reassure the child frequently and allow them to ask questions.

## After the visit

- Allow time for questions, but if the child does not wish to talk immediately after the visit, offer a change of subject or just some quiet time for them to think things through. They may come back to talk later.
- Be prepared for their distress – this may not be immediate and may be expressed in various forms. For example, they may become upset about something at school that would not usually affect them. Again, calm reassurance, spending time together and allowing the child to talk can help to ease their fears.
- The child's distress will naturally upset you. Try to ensure that you have support around you and don't be afraid to ask for help yourself.