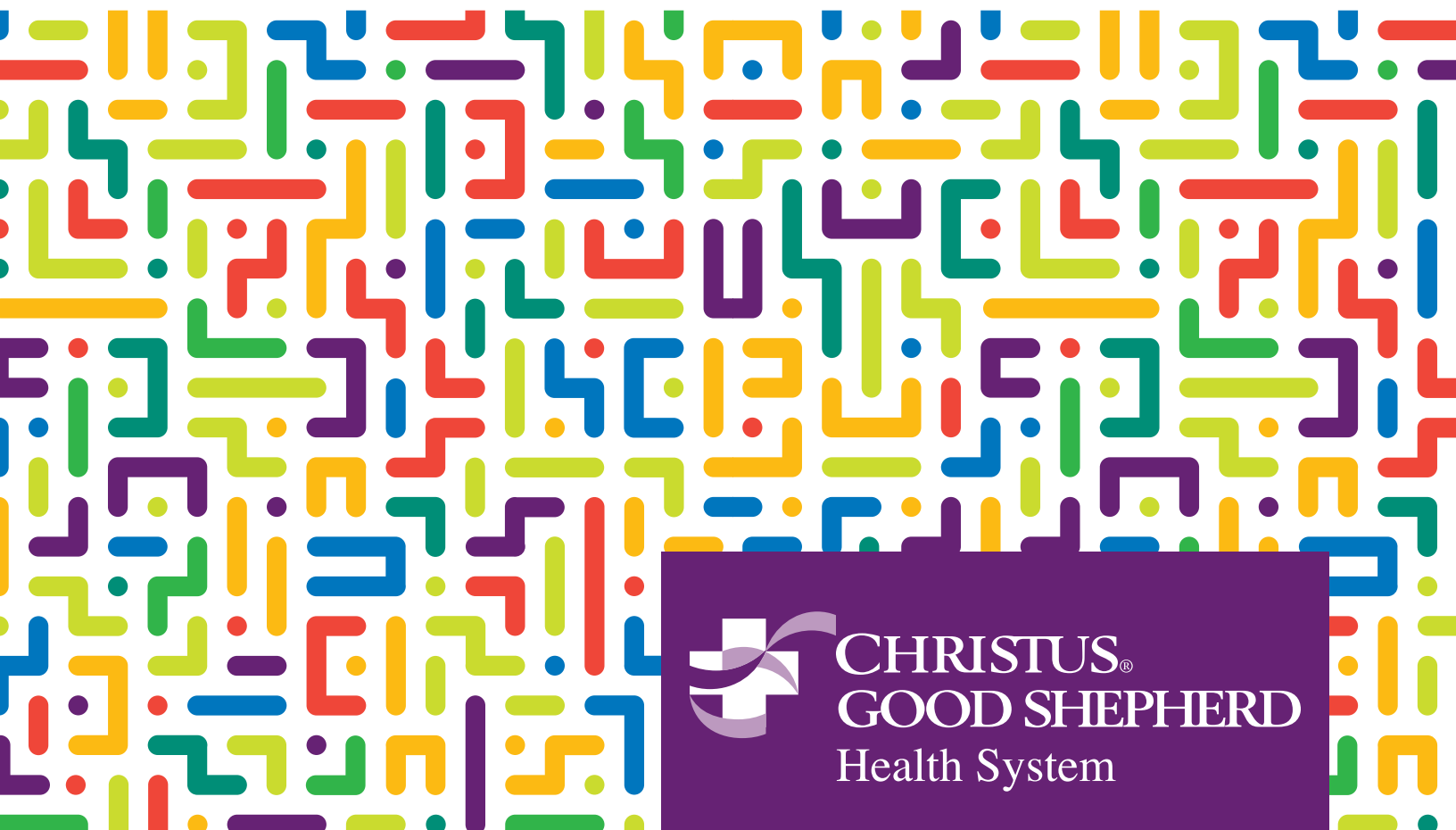




*All About Baby's Hospital Stay*  
**Caregiver  
Companion Guide**


How the NICU Experience Impacts Older Siblings  
and How You Can Help

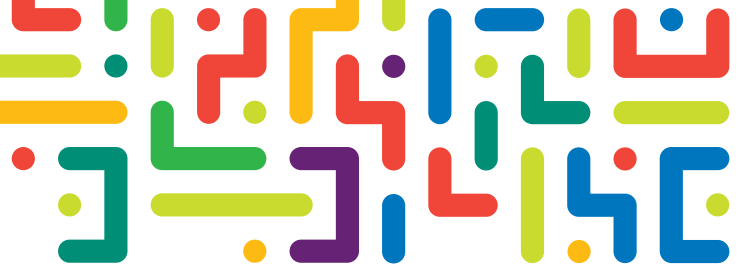




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*“The hospitalization of a child leads to changes for the entire family...”*

Bringing a new baby into a family is a huge transition for every family member. When a baby is born very early or sick and must stay in the NICU, the transition is made even more difficult. Caregivers are often hyper-focused on the well-being of the new baby and spend a lot of time in the NICU. Although this is absolutely justified, it can lead to siblings being left out of the NICU experience. This exclusion can heighten stress for siblings and lead to a wide range of emotions and changes in behavior.

Luckily, your child has you to guide them through this stressful time. You can provide them with the information and support necessary to positively cope with having a new baby in the NICU. This guide and the accompanying sibling activity guide will help you do just that.



# 7 Quick Tips

For supporting siblings through the NICU Experience

1. Encourage siblings to express their emotions
2. Assure siblings they are in no way responsible for baby being in the hospital
3. Expect changes in behavior and recognize the situation is likely the reason behind the behavior
4. Maintain daily and home routines as much as possible
5. Get siblings involved in the NICU experience
6. Check in often with siblings to address their emotions, concerns, and questions
7. Spend quality time alone with siblings



# *The Sibling Experience*

## **Expectation vs. Reality**

The idea of welcoming a new baby is an exciting one for many children. They are eager to meet baby and take on older sibling duties when baby is born. However, the expectations siblings have about the role they will play when baby arrives, is often very different than the reality they experience if their little brother or sister must stay in the NICU.

Below is a chart comparing siblings' expectations with their reality when baby must stay in the NICU.

<b>Sibling's Expectation</b>	<b>Sibling's Reality</b>
<b>1.</b> Able to see and hold baby soon after birth.	<b>1.</b> Likely unable to hold baby. May not be able to see baby.
<b>2.</b> Spend time with whole family at home after baby arrives.	<b>2.</b> Spend a lot of time without baby and caregivers.
<b>3.</b> Daily routine only disrupted for a few days until baby and family come home.	<b>3.</b> Daily routine potentially disrupted for a long period of time.
<b>4.</b> Fulfill sibling duties such as reading to baby, gathering diapering supplies, and showing baby around the house.	<b>4.</b> Often have no contact with baby with little explanation as to why.



# Sibling Emotions

Research shows that siblings of NICU babies often experience a wide variety of emotions throughout the NICU experience. Below are just a few of the emotions your child may face.

- Sadness
- Confusion
- Anger
- Abandonment
- Fear
- Excitement
- Worry
- Nervousness
- Impatience
- Guilt
- Loneliness
- Jealousy

# Sibling Reactions

The way siblings respond to baby being in the NICU can vary. Sibling responses often depend on their age and their ability to understand what is happening around them. Below are common behavioral responses siblings may show.

- Become quiet and withdrawn
- May start thumb sucking or regress to “baby-like” behaviors
- Have trouble eating or sleeping
- Regress with toilet training or have night time accidents
- Trouble at school
- Be clingy and want your undivided attention
- Act out to gain attention
- Be aggressive and get mad more often



# How Can **You** Help?

1

## **Encourage emotional expression**

Make it clear that emotional expression is not only acceptable but encouraged. Verbalize and model emotional expression. Be a genuine support for siblings when they need to express emotions.

2

## **Assure siblings**

Assure siblings they did not cause baby to become hospitalized. Young children often believe they are somehow responsible for their sibling's illness. Try to explain the cause of the illness in a developmentally appropriate way.

3

## **Expect changes in behavior**

Be aware that behavioral changes in siblings are expected and are likely a result of them trying to manage their thoughts and feelings related to the situation. Behavioral changes should be addressed, but it is important to recognize the connection between these changes and the NICU experience and to react appropriately.

4

## **Maintain routine**

Try to maintain the household routine as much as possible. Remember, the more siblings' lives change, the more uncomfortable and insecure they feel.

5

## **Get siblings involved**

Allow siblings to experience and have a role in baby's medical experience. If possible, allow the sibling to visit the baby. They can also participate in the NICU experience using the activities in the sibling guide.

6

## **Check in often**

Regularly check in with siblings to see how they are coping. Use this time to address any questions the sibling has, or to provide any medical updates. Remember that any information shared should be honest, simple, and developmentally appropriate.

7

## **Quality time**

Set aside time to give siblings your undivided attention. This gives you the chance to spend quality time with them, which helps decrease negative emotions and behaviors. This also shows them they are still valued and cared for.

# About the **Sibling Activity Guide**

The sibling activity guide was created to give siblings the space to express themselves creatively, learn about the NICU in terms they can understand, and encourage their participation in the NICU experience.

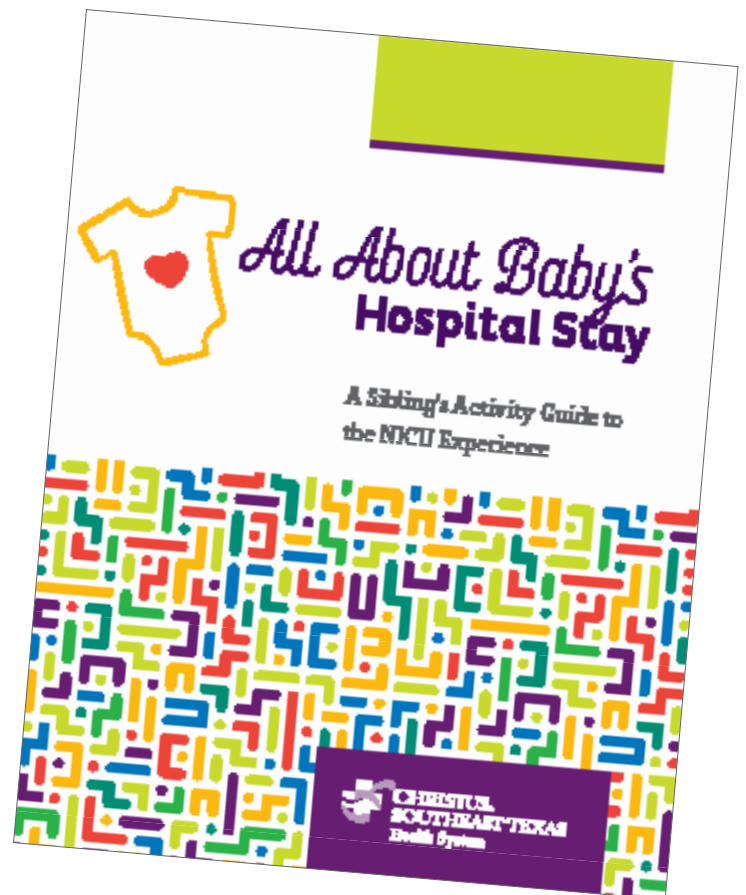
## How to Use the Guide

Let your child take the lead.

Offer guidance and support often.

Learn from the activities your child completes.

Discuss activities and related expression/ inexpression.







# Providing **Activity** Support

Tips for making the most out of the Sibling Guide

## 1. All about me

**Purpose:** Allow siblings to be excited about their new or continuing role in the family. This is a space for them to introduce themselves and the family to the baby.

**What you can do:** Remind siblings that even though baby is staying in the NICU, they are still a big brother or sister and have an important role.



### **Big Sister/Brother Certificate**

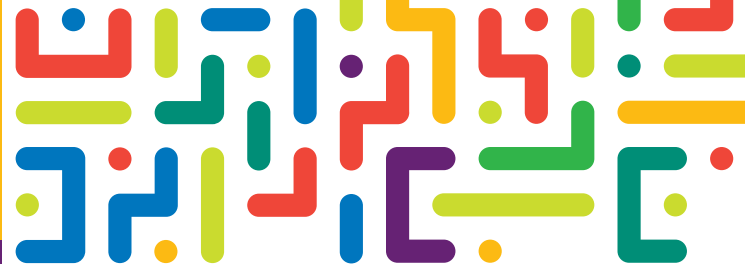
Help your child fill out and cut out the appropriate certificate. Explain the importance of the certificate and acknowledge their new or continuing role.

## 2. All about the NICU

**Purpose:** Introduce siblings to basic NICU terms and equipment, explain what the NICU environment is like, and prepare them to see baby.

**What you can do:** Your support in this section is needed. Help explain the terms and concepts in this section at a level that can be understood by your child.

Answer any questions your child has using simple and honest language. Review this information with your child each time they are preparing to see baby in the NICU. This will ease fears and give children confidence going into the situation.



**What QUESTIONS do you have?**

Write questions you might have about the NICU here.

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If you would like, share these questions with your caregiver or baby's nurse.

18

### Questions

Your child may use this space to write questions they are nervous to verbally ask. Look here for guidance when discussing the NICU experience with your child. For younger children, this serves as a great reminder for you to ask them if they have any questions.

## 3. All about getting involved

**Purpose:** Encourage siblings to get involved, even if they cannot be physically present in the NICU.

**What you can do:** Encourage siblings to complete the activities and support them in their creativity throughout.

**Who is taking care of BABY?**

Keep track here.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Job: \_\_\_\_\_ Job: \_\_\_\_\_ Job: \_\_\_\_\_



Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Job: \_\_\_\_\_ Job: \_\_\_\_\_ Job: \_\_\_\_\_

20

### Who is taking care of baby?

Keep your child updated on who is taking care of baby. This will help take away some of the confusion and vagueness about the NICU. It will also let your child know there are a lot of people working hard to get baby stronger and healthier.

**BABY'S Progress**

Ask your caregiver for updates on baby and keep track of them here.

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### Baby's progress

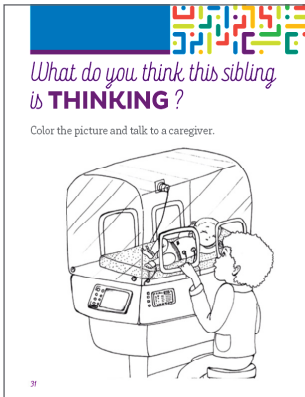
Let your child know when baby accomplishes something in the NICU. This will keep them informed and will allow them to celebrate baby's milestones. Reported progress can be small wins, or big triumphs. Any update will make your child happy.



## 4. All about my feelings

**Purpose:** Encourage siblings to participate in emotional exploration and expression during the NICU experience

**What you can do:** Work closely with your child on these activities. They may not even realize how much the situation is impacting them, and will likely need to talk through what they are experiencing.



### What is he thinking?

This activity is simple, but can be impactful. Have a conversation with your child about what the older sibling in the picture might be thinking or going through. This will likely give you a good idea of what your child is experiencing.



### Coupon book

Help your child cut the coupons out. Do your best to accept and honor the coupons as your child cashes them in. Each coupon suggests a great idea for spending quality, one-on-one time with your child that will make them feel special and loved.

# 5. All about fun

**Purpose:** Provide NICU themed traditional activity pages that reinforce what your child has learned in the rest of the guide.

**What you can do:** Admire your child’s problem-solving and artistic talents. Younger children may need help completing the activities. They can also use the pages simply as coloring sheets. Just the exposure to the pictures is great for siblings of all ages.



## Secret message

This is a fun activity where the sibling receives a message directly from baby in the NICU. The secret message is "I can't wait to see you!" You can play up this message and use it as a chance to talk about an upcoming sibling visit, if that is an option.



*Questions &* **Notes**

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All About Baby's Hospital Stay™

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Department of Human Development  
& Family Science

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