

# Navigating Holiday Gatherings After a Child's Hospitalization or Diagnosis

*Families should decide together what they're comfortable sharing and how to direct the conversation*

Nationwide Children's Hospital

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## SOUND BITES

<b>CG: Gina McDowell, LPCC-S</b> <b>Nationwide Children's Hospital</b>	<p>Families should decide what they want to share ahead of time: <i>"Being able to plan ahead and know what's okay to talk about and what we want to keep private, it's a personal preference for each family, so I think being able to have that kind of huddle ahead of time helps prepare for those types of situations."</i> :15</p> <p>Start by asking the child what they are comfortable talking about: <i>"Starting out by asking the child, 'What are you comfortable sharing,' is very important, and then figuring out what they don't want to talk about and what they're not comfortable sharing and letting the child know that it's okay to set a boundary."</i> :14</p> <p>Make a plan ahead of time and learn how to set boundaries: <i>"What we want to share, who we want to share it with. And then knowing how to handle it if we don't to share. So how can we respectfully decline and respectfully set a boundary if there's something that comes up that, you know, it's creating a little discomfort, and I'm not really comfortable talking about that. How are we going to address it?"</i> :18</p> <p>Family has good intentions but should be sensitive to the situation: <i>"Family members often want information. They want to know how they can help. They want to make sure everyone is okay. But for the family who has just experienced a hospitalization this can be a sensitive subject, and without preparation, may not know how to answer these questions."</i> :16</p> <p>The best way to give support is to offer help without prying: <i>"You want to let your family member know that you want to provide comfort, that you're there for help, and I think the best way to do that is just giving that validation of, 'I know you guys have gone through a lot recently. Please let me know if there's anything you need.' We don't necessarily need to pry for information in order to show that we want to provide support and that we're there."</i> :22</p>
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<p><b>CG: Gina McDowell, LPCC-S</b> Nationwide Children's Hospital</p>	<p>Kids should know that it is okay to talk about mental illness: <i>"We want to keep that idea that it's okay to talk about mental illness, and you know, we don't want to hide those things or act like it's not an okay thing to talk about. We want even our youngest kids to know that it's okay to have these conversations."</i> :14</p> <p>A mental illness should be viewed the same as a physical illness: <i>"The goal is that we're, that we get to the point where it doesn't matter if it was a physical illness or if it was a mental illness. Illness is illness, and we're treating it, and we're going to the right place to treat that."</i> :12</p> <p>Plan ahead for situations where a child is feeling overwhelmed: <i>"Setting up cues for maybe kids towards their parents, whatever it might be. Letting them know that they might need a break, they might need a little bit of space, again, that is something that we want to have that conversation ahead of time and having that cope-ahead plan and having strategies in place for what that will look like."</i> :13</p> <hr/> <p>The first step should be listening to what's important to the child: <i>"Really, we focus on open and honest communication, so allowing kids to express how they're feeling, and not always correcting them. So if a child says, 'That was the most difficult thing I've ever experienced,' rather than saying, 'Oh, no it wasn't,' maybe we can say, 'Well, tell me more about that.'"</i> :14</p>
<p><b>CG: Sami Rundo, CCLS</b> Nationwide Children's Hospital</p>	<p>Having a conversation can help determine what's okay to share: <i>"When you have that open dialogue about your experience you can identify, is that something you want mom and dad to talk about in public? Is it okay if they share it with people? Is it not okay? What are some things that you feel are private for you?"</i> :16</p> <p>Ask questions to find out what a child is comfortable talking about: <i>"I think that one of the questions that you can ask is, 'What question makes you feel nervous?' So, 'I hope that someone doesn't ask me about...' and kind of explore that. You don't have to necessarily understand why they don't want to talk about it, but it's good to get an idea of what are kind of those no touch conversations or topics."</i> :21</p> <p>Focus on the positive when talking to others: <i>"Finding a way to have like a strength-based approach where we're talking about, 'Yeah, it was really difficult for him, but these were the things that we were amazed at that he was capable of doing, that his siblings were really supportive, that we as a family came together,' rather than focusing on the difficult aspects of a hospital experience or a diagnosis."</i> :19</p>

**CG: Sami Rundo, CCLS**  
**Nationwide Children's Hospital**

Have a support plan ready for when a child is overwhelmed:  
*"You can identify, when you're feeling upset or you're feeling overwhelmed, who is someone you can go to when you're feeling stressed. And maybe that's a code word or a signal or handshake or something like that that doesn't call attention to being upset, but then that parent knows that that child needs a little bit of extra support right now."* :18

Allow a child to take breaks with activities to keep them calm:  
*"Put together a coping plan like a book that they might enjoy reading, headphones that might help them calm. They can go do that quiet activity to to help them get a little bit of space."* :09

When expressing your support for a family, follow their lead:  
*"It's okay, depending on the relationship you have with the individual, to acknowledge the situation that the family is experiencing, but follow the family's lead. So if you ask about how they're doing, and they say, 'We're doing fine right now. We're trying to figure some things out. What else is going on in your life?' Follow their lead, and transition with the conversation."* :19

Listen to and support the family, but avoid offering advice:  
*"Listening, lending an ear, allowing families to discuss it with you, but not so much sharing advice. It's not always the time and the place to be sharing your own experience and comparing, but rather just letting them know that you're there for them when they need it."* :15

Establish ground rules for discussions and plan your responses:  
*"It's good, as a family, to normalize what is going on and have those discussions of what are our new normals, what are the boundaries and setting some ground rules during the discussion of creating that safe space to talk about it."* :18

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