



## Yes, You Can Help:

### A guide for helping family and friends in difficult times

Most of us very much want to do something to help when a family member or friend has a seriously ill child. We often don't do anything more than stammer: "Just call if I can help" because we are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. Comfort and support are true acts of friendship.

They come from being sensitive to the special needs of your friend. They come from finding ways to make things just that little bit easier. Below you will find ideas about how to comfort and support. Some come from staff, those in *italics* come from a parent.

Helpful approaches:

*Don't avoid me. Be the friend or loved one you've always been.*

Get in touch. If you are unable to make telephone contact, write a note. Ask about visiting or having lunch together somewhere close to the hospital or home. As an alternative ask if you can bring a "picnic" to the hospital.

*Just send a card to say, "I care".*

Express your genuine feelings with simple words: "I'm so sorry this has

happened to ...". Avoid easy reassurances like "God will take care of her" or glib statements like "I know how you're feeling". You probably don't know the feeling.

*Touch me. A simple squeeze of the hand can tell me you still care.*

*Weep with me when I weep; laugh with me when I laugh. Don't be afraid to share feelings with me.*

Allow your friend to express feelings even hard ones. Don't try to get him/her to be more realistic or positive. Remember, grief takes many forms other than sadness - anger, guilt, numbness, bitterness to name a few.

*Call before you visit but don't be afraid to visit. Sometimes we are lonely. Maybe I need to talk about my child's illness. Find out by saying, "Do you feel like talking about it?"*

Listen if your friend wants to talk but don't push for answers. Take your lead from the person. Some people want to talk of nothing but their child. If this is so, be a patient, generous listener.

*What's in the news? Magazines, photos, newspapers, verbal reports keep me from feeling the world is passing me by.*

Sometimes people want to hear about the normal parts of life. They want to use the time to get back in touch with the world outside the hospital. If this is

so, try to keep note of all the small happenings which might be of interest.

But don't chatter about a soccer game or a movie when your friend is obviously feeling down.

*Bring my family a positive attitude. It's catching!*

*Talk to me about the future ... tomorrow, next week, next year. Hope is so important to me.*

Be reassuring. Your friends are having to make many difficult decisions – choices about treatment options, dividing time between sick and well children, being here or being there. Don't increase their stress by questioning their decisions. Friends often do this without meaning to. They suggest other kinds of treatments, they tell stories of what happened to others that are heard as warnings. What your friends need is to know that they are doing the very best for their child. Helpful deeds:

For the family:

*Only one in my family is sick, but everyone may be suffering. Invite others in my family out. Take them places.*

*Take care of my children for me. I need a little time to be alone or with my loved one.*

Comfort the other children in the family. Do something nice with, or for, them. Perhaps include them in one of your family outings.

Offer to visit with the sick child for an hour or two so that the parents can take a break or arrange an outing with their other children.

Give the parents an evening out together by arranging for someone to baby sit their other children at home, while you visit with the sick child.

*Could you help me with some cleaning? During my child's illness, we will face dirty clothes, dirty dishes, a dirty house.*

*Water my flowers.*

*Call me to say you're bringing our favourite dish and what time you are coming. Bring food in disposable containers so I won't worry about returns.*

*Call for my shopping list and make a "special delivery" to my home.*

*Can you take me or my children somewhere? We may need transportation to a treatment, to the store, to the doctor.*

Offer to do something concrete like grocery shopping, babysitting, carpooling, etc. Bake a batch of lunchbox cookies, make a meal occasionally. Ask your friend to give you a list of specific chores that need doing from which you can select one or two. If this is not forthcoming, just do something without being asked.

Ask if there are others whom your friends would like you to contact on their behalf.

For the sick child:

*Be creative! Bring a book of thoughts, taped music, a poster for the wall, cookies to share ... or a friend who hasn't yet come to visit.*

Send the sick child a card, a picture drawn by your own children, or any small token of your affection. However, too many big presents may make it hard

for parents to keep a balance between giving the sick child some joy and making the child feel that suddenly he can have everything.

*Help my child feel good about her looks. Tell her how good she looks, considering the illness.*

*Help my family celebrate holidays (and life!) by decorating my child's hospital room, my home, or bringing tiny gifts of flowers or other natural treasures.*

GOOD FRIENDS WARM MY HEART.

*These things would be particularly helpful to me:*

---

---

---

---

---

**Developed by** the Department of Patient/Family Education, BC Children's Hospital