

Intensive therapy unit (ITU)
Harefield Hospital

Children visiting the intensive therapy unit (ITU)

This leaflet provides information to help you decide if a child should visit a parent or a close relative in the intensive therapy unit (ITU). It also gives advice about preparing a child for a visit to the hospital and the best way to support them during the visit. If you have any questions, please ask us.

Introduction

Everyone in your family will sense and be affected by the serious illness of a parent or relative. If you are anxious and stressed your child may sense that and may worry or imagine the worst.

Often our first instinct is to keep children at home to protect them from what's happening. You may feel your child is too young to understand. Or perhaps you do not know how to share information with your child about serious illness.

This leaflet is designed to help you share information with your child and decide what is best for them.

Deciding if your child should visit ITU

You could consider different ways of involving your child in visits to the hospital. For example:

- eating in The Hungry Hare restaurant with a member of the family
- spending time together in the Harefield Healing Gardens
- being present in the ITU waiting room with other members of the family
- making a video call to a parent or relative in ITU
- as well as visiting them in person in ITU

Things to think about before a visit

- What is the goal of this visit?
- What is the age of the visiting child?
- What do they know about what is happening in hospital to their parent or relative?
What do you think they understand?

- How does your child usually handle stress? Are you seeing any signs of their stress right now?
- What do you think your child's ideas are of what their parent or relative is like right now? Which do you think is worse – their ideas or reality? Would it help for them to draw what they are thinking?
- How did your child learn that a parent or relative was in the hospital?
- Did they witness anything difficult when their parent or relative was taken to hospital. For example, that person becoming injured, or ill or seeing them leave in an ambulance or helicopter?

What to consider if you decide a visit is right for you and your family

Never force a child to visit. If a child does not want to visit, offer other choices for visiting.

A child might choose to do different things for their parent or relative, and that is okay. For example, your child could:

- make a card or poster
- draw a picture
- write a letter or record a message for them
- send a photo of themselves or a special object, such as a toy or a stone
- create a music playlist



Picture above: an example of the sort of picture a child could paint

Prepare a child for the visit

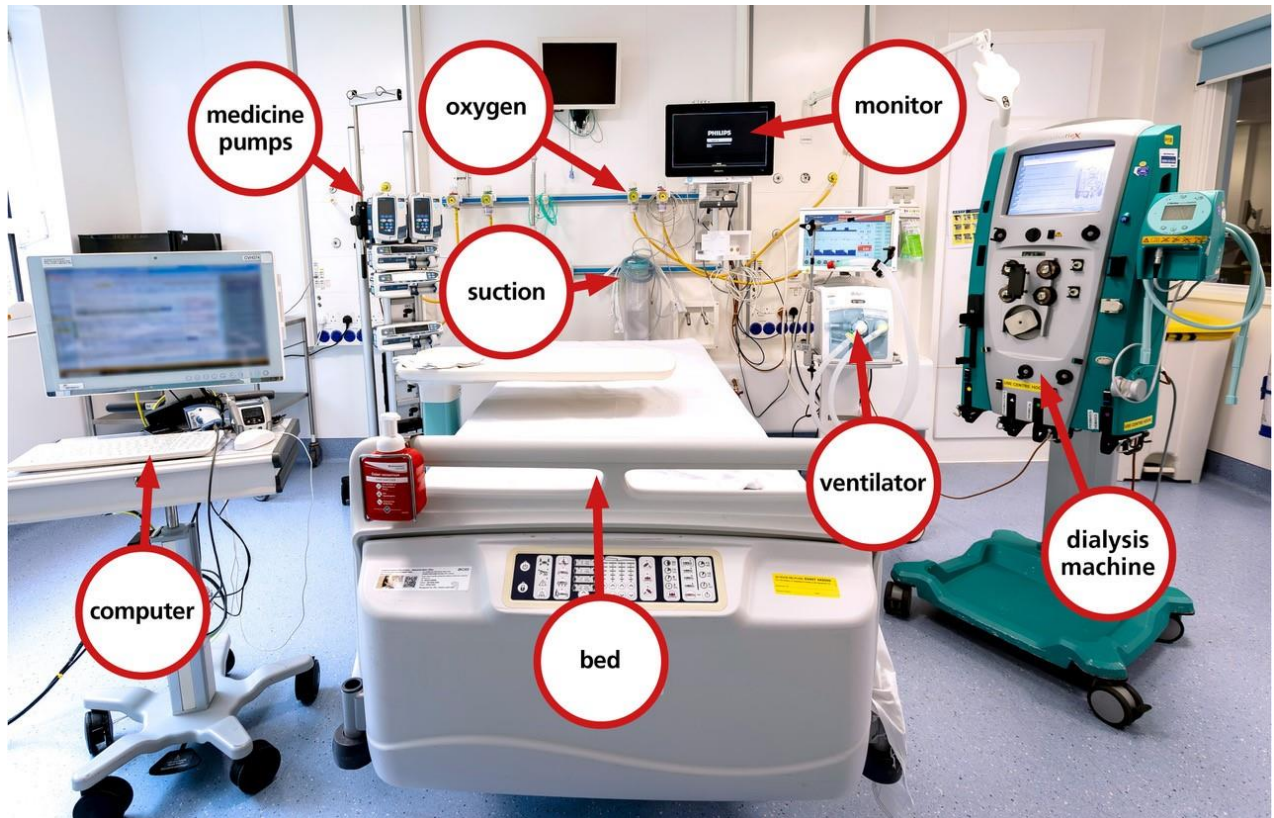
Help your child understand what they might see and hear

Pictures can help prepare a child for what they might see. Doctors, nurses and other people will be looking after a parent or relative. They will use different things to help them, such as medicines and equipment.

Talk to a child about these things

- What they might see in the hospital corridors. For example, other patients and families visiting, people in wheelchairs, doctors and nurses.
- Changes in a parent or relative's appearance from the last time they may have seen them.
- Medical equipment
 - machines
 - tubing.
- The different sounds they might hear during the visit. For example, an alarm beeping or a blood pressure cuff inflating.
- People they may meet or see in a parent or relative's room.
- Any smell that might be different.

The picture below shows some of the medical equipment they might see.



It's a good idea to give a child:

- time to talk about what they see in the picture
- time to ask questions before going into the hospital room

How children of different ages may behave

Children understand and process events and information differently depending on their age. This section provides a guide to the:

- thoughts, fears, and feelings common in children of various age ranges
- some responses and ideas to address those thoughts, fears and feelings

Pre-school children

Many very young believe that their thoughts, actions or wishes caused the accident or illness.

Find out what they believe made their loved one sick or injured, then address any basis for unnecessary guilt. For example, you could say: "Lots of kids think that, but it rarely happens that way."

Children may fear that what has happened to their parent or relative will happen to them too

- Help a child understand that this will not happen to them, if that is accurate.
- They may feel anger and/or a sense of abandonment (neglected) with separation from parents or carers during stressful times. They may believe that they deserve punishment or that further abandonment will result.
- Ask a child: "How has it been for you while other members of your family spend time here at the hospital?" Listen to what a child has to say, then acknowledge and accept their feelings.
- Ask a child: "If you were in the hospital, where do you think your parents would be? What do you think your parents would do?"

Children may believe that staff members are hurting their loved one

- You could say to a child: "The nurses' and doctors' job is to help stop the hurting or keep it from getting worse."
- "Here is how the nurses and doctors help..." and give examples.

Children have a limited understanding of our bodies and how they work

- Use pictures of children's body books.
- Ask the children to draw what they think or imagine.

Children may invent their own explanations when there are gaps in communication. Their explanation of the illness or injury may have nothing to do with reality.

Provide honest, accurate information, updating as necessary if a parent or relative's condition or a child's needs change.

School-age children

School-age children may wonder if something they did caused the illness or injury. They may think: “If I had done something differently, this wouldn’t have happened.”

- Ask a child: “What makes you think that?”
- Explain to a child: “Lots of children think that, but it rarely happens that way.”
- Give examples from real life: “If you wished this object to fall, could you make it happen?”

They may worry “Can I catch it?” and may not want to touch or go near a parent or relative in ITU

- Ask a child: “Do you think that you can catch this from touching?”
- Explain to a child: “We wouldn’t let you touch him or her if that would happen.
- We know that it does not happen that way with this.”

They may wonder: “Will a parent or relative be the same?”

There are lots of things you could say in response. For example:

- “We hope so.”
- “The nurses and doctors have seen some (or many) people who have been sick (or hurt) like this and who have got better.”
- “They need lots of help to get better.”
- “It may take a long time.”
- “We are not sure that all the parts of their body will work the same way. We hope that they will.”
- “We are very worried, and the doctors and nurses are doing everything they can to take care of them.”

Teenagers

It is likely teenagers have things on their mind even if they do not tell you

- Suggest times when they can ask questions or share what they are wondering.
- Provide privacy, as appropriate. Ask if they prefer to be alone or have family or staff close by.

Teenagers may talk in medical jargon without fully understanding the meanings

- Ask what they understand about what is going on. Reassure them that there are adults who do not understand many parts of the medical information.
- Ask them: “What does that mean to you?” if they use big words or medical words.

During the visit

Take pictures and objects from home for the parent or relative. Examples include a photograph, picture, stuffed toy and a handwritten letter.

- Taking a photo of the child with a parent or relative can help the child to feel closer to the person in hospital. Placing the photo at the hospital bedside can show the importance of the child's visit.
- Something from home gives the child something to hold, such as a stuffed toy or a handwritten letter.
- This can help a child feel closer to a parent or relative who is in the hospital.

Give the child time to decide how close they would like to get to the bedside after walking into a hospital room. Be aware of a child's behaviour and body language. If they become uncomfortable, consider making the visit shorter or ending it.

Other things to remember before you bring your child to ITU

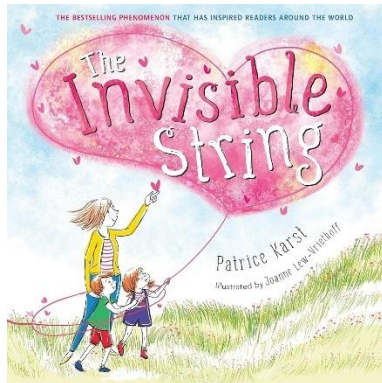
- Check with the nurse in charge before visiting with your child so we can support you and prepare for the visit.
- Prepare yourself for the visit. Take time to consider your needs and how a visit to the hospital may affect you. For example, think about how the reactions of a child during a visit may also affect your own emotions.

Support and more information

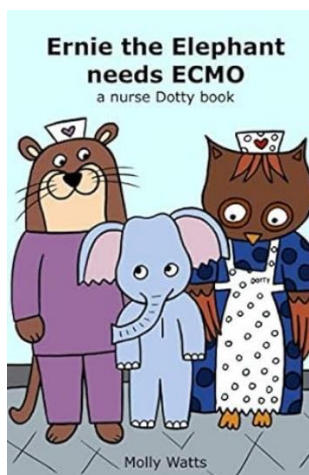
We recommend some books to help support children with serious illness and loss. (see pages 7 and 8). They are aimed at different age groups.

We may be able to lend you books or you can buy them. Ask the nurse in charge if we have any copies available.

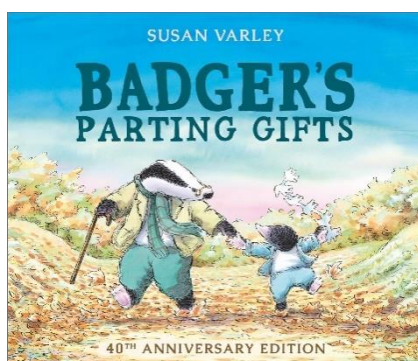
The Invisible String: 1 : Karst, Patrice, Lew-Vriethoff, Joanne: Amazon.co.uk: Books



Ernie the Elephant needs ECMO: a nurse Dotty book : Watts, Molly: Amazon.co.uk: Books



Badger's Parting Gifts: 35th Anniversary Edition of a picture book to help children deal with death : Varley, Susan: Amazon.co.uk: Books



When Someone Has a Very Serious Illness: Children Can Learn to Cope with Loss & Change (Drawing Out Feelings) : Heegaard, Marge Eaton: Amazon.co.uk: Books



As Big as it Gets: Supporting a Child When a Parent is Seriously Ill: Amazon.co.uk: Stokes, Julie A., Crossley, Diana, Stubbs, Di: 9780953912391: Books
Or from the children's charity Winston's Wish:
winstonswish.org



You can also find support online:

ICUSteps is an intensive care patient support charity. Visit icusteps.org

Contact details

Intensive therapy unit (ITU) at Harefield Hospital

Phone 01895 828685 or 01895 828682

Help us to improve visits to ITU

We would like to find out about your experience of visiting patients in the ITU with children.

Please help us by completing a short confidential survey. To access the survey, scan the QR code (shown right) with your smartphone or tablet.



Or you can complete a paper version of this survey. Just ask us for a printed copy.

Was this leaflet useful?

If you have any comments about this information, we'd be happy to hear from you.

email gstt.healthcontent@nhs.net

NHS 111

This service offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day,

phone 111 **web** www.111.nhs.uk

Become a member of the Trust

Members contribute to Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it's up to you how you get involved. To find out more, **phone** 0800 731 0319 **email** gstt.members@nhs.net or **web** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern about any service or department at Royal Brompton and Harefield hospitals. Contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

- Royal Brompton Hospital **phone** 020 7349 7715
- Harefield Hospital **phone** 01895 826 572

Or **email** gstt.rbhh-pals@nhs.net

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A list of sources is available on request