

# Children visiting the Intensive Care Unit

Information and advice for parents and carers

## Intensive Care Unit (ICU)

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### Should I allow my child to visit?

This can be a hard decision for parents or carers to make as you may be unsure if it will harm or benefit your child - your decision may depend upon the age of the child, the condition of your relative and your child's desire to visit.

Research has shown that children over the age of four mainly find visiting a sick relative helpful as it increases their understanding and involvement in their relative's illness and reduces their feelings of separation and fear. However, do not force your child to visit if they do not wish to.

The decision to visit does lie with you, but the nursing staff and doctors caring for your relative will also be able to advise you and provide you with practical suggestions in managing a visit. Some other considerations for you are detailed next.

### Age related considerations

**Infants:** Babies aged less than 1 year do not have a fully developed immune system. Therefore, there is a very small risk that they might pick up an infection from the ICU. They will not be aware of the situation, and should the baby start to cry, it would be best to leave the ICU.

**Toddlers:** Young children aged less than 3 years will often want to see close relatives who are in ICU (parents, siblings, grandparents). They will not be able to understand what is happening and they may find it a frightening and scary place. If you decide that they should visit, they should be with an adult to make sure that they are kept safe and who can also explain, in very simple terms, what they see. The visit should be kept short and last only a few minutes.

**Children aged 3–6 years:** Some children of this age benefit from visiting a sick relative, whereas others may find the experience upsetting. Spend some time talking about what they will see before and during the visit. Children of this age may wish to draw a picture for their relative that can be kept at their bedside. Children in this age group should always visit with an adult and the visits should be kept to a few minutes at a time.

**School-aged children:** Should be able to visit their sick relative. They need the situation explained to them and they should be encouraged to ask questions allowing for any misunderstandings to be cleared up before the visit. They should not be left by themselves and should keep their visit to a maximum of 5–10 minutes.

**Adolescents:** Should be able to visit their sick relative. Although they may fully understand the situation, it is important that they are supported by an adult and encouraged to ask questions to clarify any misunderstandings.

## **I don't want my child to visit**

If you choose not for your child to visit, please try to keep them involved by encouraging them to draw pictures to send to their relative or recording a message that can be played to them.

If they ask questions about their relative, explain to them simply what is happening, e.g: "Grandpa is in hospital as he is feeling very ill and is sleeping a lot - that's why you haven't been round to his house to see him."

## **How can I support my child?**

**Talk to your child before their visit about what to expect:** The environment of ICU, how their relative may look, smells, staff working there etc.

**Be with them during the visit:** Make the time about them being with their family member.

**Be prepared for questions they may ask:** Talk to your nurse about this, they can help you explain the situation.

**Talk about the visit and your relatives' illness once you have returned home:** Your child may have questions or may wish to talk through the experience with you.

**Make sure that your child's school or nursery is aware that you have a very sick relative:** They can provide extra support to you and your child.

If you or your children are finding it hard to cope, please speak to your nurse as we can put you in touch with people who can help.

## **Simple Guidelines**

If you do decide to bring your children on to ICU to visit a relative we ask you please:

- Only bring children to visit immediate family members (eg parents, siblings or grandparents).
- Do not bring in children who are unwell or have any signs of infections. Patients in ICU are very susceptible to infection. Please do not put them at risk.
- Do check that your children are up to date with their immunisations. If not, please don't bring them in.
- Please ensure that your child is supervised by an adult at all times.
- The unit has lots of electrical equipment, tubing and wires. Please do not allow small children to play with them.
- Let the staff know when you will visit - we can then keep waiting to a minimum.
- We suggest that visits by children are kept to 5-10 minutes at a time. Any longer and they may become restless or bored.
- Try to come with another person who will be able to play with your child in the waiting room, giving you more time with your relative.
- Bring along somebooks, colouring in or handheld games consoles to keep them busy while waiting.

- Help us to maintain good infection control - when visiting always remove outside jackets and watches, hands should be washed on entering and leaving the ICU (you can use alcohol gel).
- Do not allow your child to sit on the bed, but they will be able to hold hands or give their relative a cuddle (ask your nurse to help with this).

## Children visiting the Intensive Care Unit

You are welcome to visit the ICU at any time and we encourage family members and close friends to visit their loved ones as this can help the wellbeing of the patient and aid their recovery. We also welcome children to visit, however you may need to give this some thought before they visit.

Our staff realise that having a sick family member in ICU can be stressful for yourself and other family members, especially children, whom may have many questions why their relative is missing from family life.

## Contact Us

**Intensive Care Unit - MMUH**

0121 507 4040

## Sources used for the information in this leaflet

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