

# *The* ROYAL MARSDEN

NHS Foundation Trust

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## Should children visit?

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Information for families considering whether children should visit a relative in critical care



**NHS**

## **Introduction**

It is often difficult to decide whether or not to bring a child or young person to visit a relative in hospital. The decision can be even more difficult if their relative is being cared for in a critical or intensive care unit. This leaflet offers information which may help you make that decision.

## **Is there research about whether it is helpful or not for children to visit a relative in intensive care?**

Psychological research suggests that, as long as the child wants to visit and is supported throughout, this can provide reassurance to them.

## **Common concerns adults have about children visiting critical care**

You may worry that:

- The child might catch an illness
- The child might give someone an illness
- The visit might distress the patient
- The child might be distressed by the visit
- The child might misbehave during the visit
- The child might be too young to understand.

## **What might the benefits be?**

A younger child may be frightened that their relative has gone away or is cross with them. They can be reassured to see where their relative is and see that they are being cared for.

Older children appreciate being more included in what is happening to their family.

Visits give children a better understanding of what is happening. They also give them an opportunity to provide comfort and affection to their relative.

## Things to consider when deciding if a child should visit

- Does the patient want the child to visit them?
- Does the child want to visit?
- Is there an adult available to accompany the child while they visit?
- Is the child emotionally vulnerable or easily overwhelmed?
- Does the child have any current illnesses, for example, coughs or colds?

## Things to remember when the child visits

- Explain to the child beforehand how their relative looks and what medical equipment there is around them
- Ensure a supportive adult accompanies the child while they visit
- Plan for a short visit (10-15 minutes) but let the child leave sooner if they wish, or if they appear overwhelmed
- Do your best to answer their questions during the visit
- Seek the help of staff to help answer their questions
- Be aware that after the visit, and in the following days, the child may have more questions.

## Planning visits according to the age of the child

*Infants and toddlers* – Time the visit to fit in with the child's routine (naps and meals) so that they are rested and calm. The child may appreciate having toys or other play materials available in the waiting area.

*Primary school age* – Explain to the child that they may need to wait awhile to see their relative, for example if a medical procedure is under way. The child may be curious about the medical equipment. Younger children are often more-matter-of-fact about the patient than the family expects.

*Teenagers* – A teenager may appreciate some time on their own with their relative. Teenagers ask fewer questions than younger children, but may not fully understand what is going on, and might appreciate more information.

## If you think the child may be unwell

If the child has active signs of an infection, like a cough, runny nose or temperature, or has been in contact with anyone who has an infection in the previous 72 hours (particularly gastroenteritis, respiratory infections and measles, mumps and chicken pox) the visit should be delayed until you are certain they are well.

## What will happen on the day?

- The child must wash their hands/use hand sanitizer when entering the unit and before coming into contact with their relatives
- The family may be asked to sit in the waiting room while the patient is receiving private care or having a procedure
- The nurse will answer any questions you may have.

## What if the child does not visit?

Suggest that they draw pictures or make ‘thinking of you’ cards regularly to be brought in to their relative. Consider whether it is possible for them to keep in touch by text, voicemail, telephone or video messaging.

Having video calls with relatives can be a good way to prepare the child prior to visiting. Video calls can also be beneficial when when visiting is not permitted due to infection or if the family is not local.

## Contact details

Adult Psychological Support Team: **020 8661 3006** or **020 7808 2777** (9am – 5pm, Monday to Friday. Outside these hours please leave an answerphone message and we will return your call the next working day).

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