



## Families ... generations of strength

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# Helping Older Siblings Adjust to Their Baby Sib

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You've just come home from the hospital with your new baby, and your older child begins behaving in perplexing ways: Your two-year-old hits your leg as you walk in the door and runs away; your nearly three-year-old, who has been dry for over six months, starts to have bathrooming accidents on a regular basis; your four-year-old starts refusing to go to preschool even though he has been excited about going.

What's happening here? This is supposed to be a happy time. Maybe you're experiencing something that almost all families experience with the addition of more children to that family, namely, sibling rivalry.

Sibling rivalry is defined as the competition between siblings for the love, approval, and attention of one or both parents, (Brown,1992). It is completely natural for older children to feel jealous toward a new baby. From the older child's viewpoint, the new baby receives all the attention, visitors, gifts, and special handling.

The older child often feels displaced, frustrated, angry, and even unloved.

Suppose your spouse comes home one day and says "Honey you're just going to be so excited! I'm bringing home another spouse to share our home and you're going to really like her! She's little and so cute, and you can help to take care of her and it will be so much fun!" It's hard for parents to understand why the child that they love so much would not like to have a new brother or sister. It's because they feel threatened.

Basically they don't want to share your time and affection with someone else.

### What Sibling Rivalry Might Look Like

The most common symptom of this rivalry is lots of demand for attention. The older child may want to be held and carried about, especially when the mother is busy with the newborn. Other symptoms include regressive behavior such as thumb-sucking, wetting or soiling. Aggressive behavior, such as handling the baby roughly, can also occur. The peak age for this kind of sibling rivalry is one to three years, but it can be seen in four- and five-year-olds. If not handled properly children can carry negative feelings about their brothers or sisters into their teens or even into adulthood.

### Before the Baby Comes Home

Before the baby is born it is important to prepare the older child. This can help a great deal to minimize the feelings of jealousy. Some things you can do are:

- Talk about the pregnancy. Have your older child feel your baby's movements.
- Encourage your older child to help you prepare the baby's room.
- Move your older child to a different room or big bed several months before the baby's birth if she is going to have a change.
- Read books together about what happens during pregnancy as well as after the baby is born.
- Look through family photographs and talk about your older child's first year of life.
- Refer to the new baby as our baby.

## After the Baby Arrives

- Call your older child daily from the hospital.
- Try to have your older child visit you and the baby in the hospital.
- When you return home from the hospital, spend your first moments with the older child. Have someone else carry the new baby in the house.
- Give the older sibling a gift from “the new baby.” Ask visitors to give extra notice to the older child. Have your child unwrap the baby’s gifts.

## Adjustments In the Newly Expanded Family

Children react differently to the change in their family. Some children are openly angry with the new baby, some are kind to the baby but angry with their mothers, and some breeze right through the change without any trouble at all. Each child’s response is unique, but all children will benefit from the following tips.

- Tell your child often what a special big brother/big sister he/she is.
- A 20-30 minute daily play time alone with either mom or dad and the older child, has proven to be one of the most helpful things parents can do to minimize sibling rivalry. Your older child will feel more kindly toward the baby if he knows he has some special time with you to count on.
- If your child is showing some negative feelings toward the baby, you could ask, “Do you sometimes wish the baby would go away?” Be sure to accept your child’s answer as well as any negative feelings he might express, since he needs to know that you care about his feelings. Emphasize that while it’s okay to be mad at the baby, it’s never okay to hit or hurt the baby. Offer her another behavior when she is upset with the baby. For example

“When you’re upset with the baby, come to me for a big hug.”

- Notice how your child interacts or plays well with the baby and encourage that. For example, “I saw how gently you touched the baby’s cheek. You really know how to be a big brother.” Or, “Look how happy she gets when you play with her.” Also encourage your child to help with the baby’s care by bringing a diaper, and holding the baby in a chair with arms with you right there.

- Some families make a “Nursing Box” for the older child to play with while mom is feeding the baby. It can have special toys in it and is only available during nursing time. Interest in the box can be maintained by changing the toys regularly.

- When you are busy with the baby you can talk to the older child about what you’re doing. Continue to give the older child attention by noticing and commenting on his behavior as a way of including him or her in that busy time.

Children who grow up in a loving, open and giving home develop the self-esteem they need to grow into adults who like and enjoy their brothers and sisters.

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