

SIBLING RIVALRY

The arrival of a new baby changes daily routines for the whole family. From the viewpoint of the older child, the new baby is an uninvited person who demands a great deal of attention from Mom and Dad – attention previously devoted to him. It is not wise to tell a first-born child that things will be exactly the same after the new baby comes – they simply will not. However, it is possible to prepare the first born so that becoming a “big brother” or “big sister” can be a positive experience.

A child who is three or four years old can understand something about where babies come from. Talking about the baby forming inside Mommy as well as looking at picture books before the birth will help your child begin to learn about conception and pregnancy. Attendance at hospital sibling classes before the birth also allows the child to see where Mommy and baby will be after the birth. He will also see that other children are going to be big brothers or big sisters and will be pleased to learn that he can visit Mom and baby at the hospital. Encourage your child to help you prepare for the new baby. Involve your child with tasks such as setting up the crib in the nursery, buying clothing and diapers, and discussing baby names.

Whenever possible, settle major developmental changes long before the birth of the new baby. Moving into a new room, adjusting to a bigger bed, learning to use the potty, starting nursery school, etc. are all major events in a child’s life. If the child must make these adjustments and deal with the newborn at the same time, it may be too much stress. Regression of behavior is very common around the birth of the baby, even under the best of circumstances. Thumbsucking, using diapers again, and wanting to sleep in the crib are all signs that the older child believes that acting like the baby is a way to get attention. Gently reassure the older child that these baby activities are not necessary and that he is loved just as much as before, and that there are “big kid” things he can do because he is older. Reading a story, singing songs, going for a walk, or playing a game all reassure the older child that he is still a loved member of the family.

Encourage your child to express feelings of anger or jealousy verbally. You may offer phrases for him to use, for example, “I bet it makes you mad when I have to spend time feeding the baby,” and then offer a strategy to diffuse his anger. If he begins to use physical aggression, tell him clearly and firmly that it is OK to be angry but it is not OK to hurt the baby. Tell him to use words to let his feeling out, or suggest he hit a pillow. Then praise him for channeling his feelings appropriately, point out other positive features about him, and discuss why being older is special too.

As children grow up, competition for parental attention is quite normal. As time goes on, most siblings truly develop affection for each other. Parents may see only the emotional outbursts of children fighting over toys or books, but when playing by themselves, the

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children may be best of friends. Much of the unpleasant behavior is really directed at the parents. If the toddler invades an older child's play area, it is reasonable to assure a safe place for play that will not be disrupted by the younger child. This makes the older child feel special and valued as he or she gains special attention from the parent. Disputes between older children are usually best settled by themselves. Parents should interfere only if one child is becoming physically violent or if they are asked by the children to mediate the dispute. It is important for children to learn to cooperate and to share. Praise them when they are actually able to accomplish these "grownup activities."

It is important to spend individual "special time" with each child at all ages. Try to listen to individual needs. If children become uncontrollably aggressive or the behavior is more out of control than you expect, discuss these matters with your pediatrician.

Suggested Reading: Siblings Without Rivalry, by Adele Faber et al.