

Sibling Relationships

Guidelines for Parents

Part II Preparing for a New Baby



Preparing your children for a new baby

A new baby brings both joys and challenges to a family. Parents are excited but they are also nervous about how their older children will react to the newborn. All sorts of questions come up: how should we tell our older children that they are going to have a baby brother or sister? Will they be jealous of the new baby? How can we make sure they will get along as they get older?

How your children react to a new baby depends largely on their ages at the time the baby is born. Knowing what to expect from each age group will make it easier to handle the changes in your family.

Ages 2 to 4

Toddlers and preschoolers may have a hard time adjusting to a new baby, especially if they are between 2 and 3 years old. At this age, your child is still very attached to you and does not yet understand about sharing you with others. Your child also may be very sensitive to changes going on around her, and may feel threatened by the idea of a new family member. Here are some suggestions for how to ease your preschooler into being a big brother or big sister.

- **Wait a while before telling your preschooler that you are going to have a baby, but do not wait too long.** A child younger than 4 will have a hard time understanding an abstract concept like an unborn baby. You should explain it to your child when you start buying nursery furniture or baby clothes, or when she starts to ask about mom's growing "stomach." Picture books for preschoolers can be very helpful. So can sibling preparation classes (ask your hospital if they offer them). Try to tell your child before she hears about the new baby from someone else.
- **Be honest.** Do not promise that things will be the same after the baby comes, because they will not be, no matter how hard you try. Explain that the baby will be cute and cuddly, but will also cry and take a lot of your time and attention. Also, make sure that your older child knows that the baby will not be an instant playmate. Let your preschooler know that you will love her just as much after the baby is born as you do now.
- **Involve your preschooler in planning for the baby.** This will make her less jealous. Let her shop with you for baby items. Show her pictures of herself as a newborn. If you are going to use some of her old baby things, let her play with them a bit before you get them ready for the new baby.
- **Do not make major changes in your preschooler's routine until after the baby is born.** You should complete making any changes such as toilet training or switching from a crib to a bed before the baby arrives. If that is not possible, put them off until after the baby is settled in at home. Otherwise, your preschooler may feel overwhelmed by trying to learn new things on top of all the changes caused by the new baby.

- **Expect your child to "regress" a little.** Do not worry too much if news that a baby is coming or if the baby's arrival makes your preschooler start acting like a baby again. For example, your toilet-trained child might suddenly start having "accidents," or she might want to take a bottle. This is normal and is your older child's way of making sure she still has your love and attention. Instead of telling her to act her age, let her have the attention she needs. Praise her when she acts more "grown-up."
- **Prepare your child for when you are in the hospital.** Toddlers and preschoolers may be confused when you leave for the hospital. Explain to your child that you will be back with the new baby in a few days.
- **Set aside some special time for your older child.** No matter how busy you are with the new baby, make sure you save some special time each day just for you and your older child. Read, play games, listen to music, or simply talk together. Show her that you want to know what she is doing, thinking, and feeling—not only about the baby but about everything else in her life. Also, make her feel a part of things by having her cuddle next to you when you feed the baby.
- **Encourage visitors to give attention to your older child.** Visitors can make such a fuss over a new baby that your older child might feel left out. Ask family and friends to spend a little time with your older child when they come to see the new baby. They might also give her a small gift when they bring gifts for the baby.
- **Have your older child spend time with dad.** A new baby presents a great opportunity for fathers to spend time alone with older children.

School-age children

Children older than 5 are usually not as threatened by a newborn as younger children are. This is particularly true if the school-age child has good self-esteem and feels loved and valued. Even so, your older child may resent the attention the baby gets. To prepare your school-age child for a new baby:

- **Tell your child about what is happening in language she can understand.** Explain what having a new brother or sister means, noting that the changes may affect her—both the good and the not-so-good.
- **Make your firstborn feel like a part of the process.** Have your older child help get the house ready for the new sibling by fixing up the baby's bedroom, picking out a new crib, buying diapers. If there is time, have her come to the hospital soon after the delivery so that she feels part of the growing family. Then, when you bring the baby home, make your older child feel that she has a role to play in caring for the baby. Tell her she can hold the baby, although she must ask you first. Praise her when she is gentle and loving toward the baby.

- **Make sure your older child feels listened to.** Do not overlook your older child's needs and activities. Let her know she can talk about her feelings. Tell her: "A new baby means a lot more work for me. If you ever feel that I am not spending enough time with you, let me know so I can give you plenty of extra love." Make an effort to spend some time alone with her each day; use that as a chance to make her feel like the most important person in your life.

What parents can do about sibling rivalry

It is important not to get too upset when your children are jealous of each other, especially if the older child is a preschooler. It takes time for a youngster to learn that his parents do not love him any less because they have another child to love.

Here are some tips on managing conflict between your children:

- **If your older child starts imitating the baby, do not make fun of or punish him.** Let him drink from a bottle or climb in the crib once or twice, but make it very clear that he does not have to act like a baby to get your attention. Praise him when he acts "grown up" and give him chances to be a "big brother." It should not take long for him to see that he gets more attention by acting his age than by acting like a baby.
- **If your older child is between 3 and 5 years old, try to cut down on conflicts over space by setting aside an area just for her.** Giving your older child her own space and keeping her things apart from shared ones will cut down on quarrels.
- **Do not compare your children in front of them.** It is natural to notice differences between your children. Just try not to comment on these in front of them. It is easy for a child to think that he is not as good or as loved as his sibling when you compare them. Remember, each child is a special individual. Let each one know that.
- **As much as possible, stay out of your children's arguments.** You may have to step in and settle a spat between toddlers or preschoolers. For example, if they are arguing over blocks, you might need to split the blocks into piles for each of them. Older children will probably settle an argument peacefully if left alone. If your children try to involve you, explain that they are both responsible for creating the problem and for ending it. Do not take sides. Set guidelines on how your children can disagree and resolve their conflicts. Of course, you **must** get involved if the situation gets violent. Make sure your children know that you will not stand for such behavior. If there is any reason to suspect that your children may become violent, watch them closely when they are together. Preventing violence is always better than punishing after the fact, which often makes the rivalry worse. Praise your children when they solve their arguments, and reward good behavior.

- **Be fair.** Divide household chores fairly. If you must get involved in your children's arguments, listen to all sides of the story. Make a "no tattling" rule. Give children privileges that are right for their ages, and try to be consistent. If you allowed one child to stay up until 9 o'clock at 10 years of age, the other should have the same bedtime when she is 10.
- **Respect your child's privacy.** When it is necessary to punish or scold, do it with the child alone in a quiet, private place. When possible, do not embarrass one child by scolding him in front of the others. This will only make the other child tease the one you punished.
- **Use regular family meetings for all family members to express their thoughts and feelings, as well as to plan the week's events. Give positive recognition and rewards (allowances, special privileges).**

Sibling relationships are very special. We form our earliest bonds with our brothers and sisters. No one else shares the same family history. By helping your children learn to value, love and respect their siblings, you are giving them a great gift—the gift of a lifelong friend.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

