

Sibling Rivalry - The Arrival of a Baby Brother or Sister

If you have more than one young child you are probably all too familiar with some of the problems of sibling rivalry. Sometimes parents who have made a relatively smooth adjustment to their first baby are completely bowled over by the experience of a second. Even if your first child is a little older, quite apart from all the practical arrangements and physical demands, you shouldn't underestimate the emotional turmoil caused by a new addition to the family.

You have a much more complex and demanding task ahead in managing the emotional and physical needs of more than one child in the years to come. Children's needs often clash, and the continuing task of understanding, managing and negotiating these, will test parents to their limit.

Having another baby

Parents approach the birth of a new baby with a range of different emotions and expectations, and you probably feel a mixture of excitement and apprehension. Your hopes and desires for your children are related to your own early experiences. A mother whose older brother was a bully may, for example, be hoping that her 18-month-old daughter will have the close friend in her younger sister or brother that she never had. A father who was an only child may not be aware that his own one-year-old could have any feelings at all about a new baby in the family.

It must be remembered that it is the parents who choose to have another baby, not the older sister or brother. They have no say in the matter and what is, to you, largely a source of happiness may be nothing of the sort to your child.



Preparing the older children

Even without being told about the pregnancy, most children are aware of a sense of pre-occupation and a shift in the focus of your interest. If the pregnancy is well established and you are aware of wanting to share the news, it is probably better to tell your child about it.

When you tell them, they won't fully understand what a new baby in the family will really mean, over and above having to share you. This makes some children quite fearful and bad-tempered, reverting to baby habits and difficult behaviour. Some children feel extremely fearful of being

'pushed out' by a new baby. All this is an absolutely normal part of their adjustment but requires a lot of patience and understanding on your part. It is also normal for a child to be as excited and happy as you are about a new baby.

There is a certain amount you can do to prepare your child for the new experience of having a brother or sister. When you talk about the positive aspects of a new baby, share some of the anticipated difficulties too. New babies do take up a lot of time, cry a lot and turn everybody's world upside down.

Your child may wish to go back to being a baby for a while, and not be a 'big sister or brother' any more. They need to know that it is OK not to feel wonderful about the new baby all the time and that sometimes they will probably feel angry, upset and jealous when their needs have to wait. You need to reassure them that they are still lovable.

Arrangements for the birth

Your firstborn child needs love and support from other familiar people at a time when their parents – and particularly their mother – become less available. The preparations for your older child's care when the new baby is born are crucial. Who is your child going to be with during this time? What will happen if you need to spend longer in hospital? What is best for your child during this period?

In this situation it helps if you can call on an extended family of relatives or friends. It is important for all your immediate circle to know what plans are in place, so that you can try and avoid too many separations, new places and strange faces at this time of major change.

Changing places

Everyone in the family has to make a big adjustment when a new baby arrives. The family set-up changes overnight: the only child becomes the older sister or brother, the baby in the family becomes the middle child.

It is wise to expect some feelings about this to last a long time, if not a lifetime.

How we feel about ourselves in relation to our brothers and sisters is a powerful thread running through our lives which can easily rise to the surface at different times.

For many children – no matter how carefully their parents have tried to prepare them – a new sister or brother remains a tremendous shock. They may have expected a new playmate while the actual arrival has turned out to be a real live, crying, time-consuming and demanding baby.

For the older child, the terrible reality of a new baby is that they are no longer the centre of their parent's universe.

Sibling rivalry

It is natural and normal for an older child to respond to the birth of a new baby with feelings of jealousy, resentment, insecurity, anger and sadness.

What is sometimes hard for parents to see or understand is the way in which these feelings make themselves known:

- One child may quite clearly try to physically hurt their baby brother or say openly that they want him to go back.
- Another child may be loving towards the new baby, but aggressive and hostile to her mother.
- One might become very withdrawn, sucking his thumb and bedwetting.
- Another may be fine at home but a cause for concern at school. Individual children have different difficulties with their new sibling:
- A child may accept the new baby with no apparent jealousy, but when the baby is nine months old and grabs their toys, enormous feelings of resentment can surface.
- Problems may arise when a younger child becomes sociable, makes their own friends and no longer needs their older sister or brother so much.
- One child may seem to be more popular or successful at school than the other. Brothers and sisters may be very close during some periods, but there may be times throughout their lives when jealous feelings are very difficult for them.

What can parents do?

Your older child's unattractive and unlovable behaviour is directly related to their fear of being utterly unlovable. They need extra reassurance and love at this point, along with clear guidelines about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. Often the response to the bad behaviour confirms their absolutely worst feelings about themselves – that they have been replaced by a new baby because they are completely unlovable.

The message to try and get across to your child is that they are not 'bad' for feeling like this, that you understand how difficult they are finding it and how rotten these feelings make them feel inside.

However, demanding and tiring this period is, remind yourself that you are the parent and it is within your power to try to break this cycle. Take some consolation from the fact that your child trusts your love enough to test you to the limit, and to show you how bad they are feeling.

Although it may often be hard for you to manage both your older child and the new baby, your continuing love allows your child a safe place to express their feelings.

If you feel you need help, contact your GP or health visitor or local Child Guidance or Child and Family Clinic (the addresses are in the telephone directory under your local Health Authority).

Some helpful practical tips

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Try and avoid too many other life changes occurring at the same time as the new arrival. Moving to a new house or starting at playgroup, for example, are best delayed if at all possible.

- Take time to encourage and appreciate any helpful and loving gestures made towards the new baby, while ignoring negative and babyish behaviour as far as possible.
- Find small, manageable tasks for your older child to do to encourage them to be involved. Don't push it if you get a negative response but give praise for the help you do receive.
- Try to arrange some special, baby-free time for you and your older child to have a quiet read or play on your own.
- Be firm about negative behaviour without making your child feel guilty. Stress that it is what they are doing, not what they are, that is unacceptable.
- Beware of getting into the habit of thinking about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, and 'good' and 'bad' children within a family. Family myths can be hard to break.
- Watch out for signs of withdrawal or depression in your older child and mention any concerns to school or playgroup staff. A child who is finding their intense feelings about a new baby too difficult to share may bury them and need help in talking about them to someone outside the family.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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