

Sibling Rivalry and the Birth of a New Baby



Probably all children who have a brother or sister will experience sibling rivalry at one time or another. Sibling rivalry is a natural, normal phenomenon. It can take many different forms and can have any number of different causes. Often, the most upsetting to children, however, is the rivalry that comes with the birth of a sibling.

The arrival of a new baby is a joyous time for a family. For older children, though, this is often a time of confusion. Older children's daily routines are often disturbed. While their mothers are in the hospital, older children may even have to stay at the home of a relative or friend, which can be even more upsetting.

After the new baby is brought home from the hospital, older children will see their lives change in many ways.

They will realize that their parents no longer have as much time for them as they used to. They will notice that the new baby gets a lot of attention from both parents.

Most of the time, children feel love and admiration for a new brother or sister. But, children, especially older children, may also feel anger or jealousy at times. These conflicting feelings can be very confusing to older children.

Generally, sibling rivalry is the strongest when children are between one and three years of age at their sibling's birth. One-to-three year-olds are still very dependent on parents to meet their needs. They haven't learned how to share their parents or anything else for that matter. A new baby can be very threatening. After the age of three, children become more independent. They don't depend on their parents as much to get their needs met. For example, three-year-olds may by this age be toilet trained and able to feed themselves. They may have friends outside of the home and, therefore, won't be as possessive of their parents as younger children.

It is generally thought that first-born children have the toughest time

adjusting to the birth of a sibling. For all of their lives, they haven't had to share their parents with anyone. It's quite an adjustment to have to learn to share so suddenly.

What to Expect from Older Children

Sibling rivalry takes many shapes and forms. Here are some common reactions to the birth of a sibling:

***Regression** - Behaviors parents might have thought their children had outgrown may return. For example, toilet-trained children may begin to have accidents. Thumb sucking may return. Older children may want to drink out of a bottle again. These behaviors are normal, and they probably won't last very long. Thus, parents shouldn't worry.

***Jealousy** - Children will probably feel jealous, especially about the time and attention the new baby receives from parents and others.

***Overt Hostility** - Children may express anger and hostility towards the new baby. Although this is perfectly normal, it is important that parents make it known to their children that hitting or hurting the new baby is not allowed.

***Covert Hostility** - Some children may act very loving toward the new baby, and then exhibit hostility in other ways. Sometimes, hostility is very subtle, for example, a hug that is so hard that the new baby cries.

***Withdrawal** - Older children may react to their new brother or sister by withdrawing. They may become very quiet, mope around, and/or refuse to go out and play.

***Attention-seeking behavior** - To get more attention from their parents, older children may resort to all kinds of behavior. They often become more demanding and difficult.

How to Prepare the Older Child for a New Sibling

Sibling rivalry is inevitable. There is no way that parents can eliminate it completely. There are, however, some things that can be done to minimize sibling rivalry and jealousy. Preparing older children for the birth of a sibling is one thing that will make the transition from only children to older children a smooth one. Here are some things parents can do.

***Tell your children about the pregnancy.** Parents shouldn't tell their children too soon, however.

Eight or nine months is a long time to wait for a sibling to be born. Instead, parents should wait until the pregnancy shows. Some professionals recommend waiting until at least the third trimester or until children ask about their mother's changing shape.

***Tell your children what to expect.**

Parents should explain to their older children exactly what will happen to them while their mother is in the hospital. Parent should let their children know who will be taking care of them, where they will be staying, and when they will be able to see and talk to both parents and the new baby. Parents should try to prepare their children for the changes that will occur in their lifestyle after the new baby comes home from the hospital. Parents should mention that they will be very busy with the new baby, that the new baby will cry a lot and will eat and sleep a lot. Parents should also explain to their children that although caring for the baby will take a lot of time, this doesn't mean that they are loved any less.

***Include your children in what is going on.** Parents should let their older children take part in any preparations for the new child. For example, parents can let their older

children help get the baby's room ready. Parents can take their older children on a tour of hospital. This way, they will know exactly where their mother will be while she's away. If the expectant parents are up to it, they can take their older children to a prenatal check-up and let them listen to their new brother or sister's heartbeat. After the baby is born, parent should let the older children visit the hospital, if it's allowed, and let them hold the baby if they want to.

***Make arrangements so that the arrival of the new baby changes older children lives as little as possible.** If parents plan to make changes in her older children's lives such as changing bedrooms, moving older children from a crib to a bed, etc., they should try to do so **months** before the baby arrives. This will minimize older children's feelings that they are being moved out of the way to make room for the new baby.

**Other Things to do to
Minimize Rivalry**

***Encourage older children to help with the baby.** Parents should try to ease their older children into their new role as big sister or big brother. Parent should let their children help take care of the baby.

Even small children can fetch diapers, etc. Parent should then let their older children know how much they appreciate the help. Parents should be careful, however, not to turn their children into servants. If older children do not want to help, parents shouldn't force them.

***Spend time alone with the older children.** Parents should make sure they have plenty of special time to spend with their children. Older children need to know that their parents haven't abandoned them. Parents should try to make time for their older children when the baby is awake, as well as asleep. This way older children won't think the baby has to be out of the way for parents to spend time with them.

***Be patient, understanding, and supportive.** This can be a very difficult time for older children. They need to be shown and told that they are still loved very much. Older children need to be reassured by parents. Parents should tell and show their older children that they still love them and that they are still important.

Don'ts

***Don't ask older children if they want a brother or sister.** They have no choice in the matter.

***Don't tell older children that the new baby will be a playmate for them.** The new baby will probably be quite a nuisance to older children. The new baby probably won't be a playmate for several years.

***Don't ignore unacceptable behavior.** It won't go away. Instead, identify and deal with it immediately.

***Don't rush older children into mastering new skills like toilet training before the baby is born.** If older children are not ready for toilet training well before the birth of the new baby, it is best to wait until after the baby is born and things have settled down around the house. If older children are not weaned, it is best to accomplish this well before the baby is born.

How to Handle Rivalry When It Occurs

***For older children, encourage talking about feelings.** Parents should encourage their children to discuss their feelings, whether they're good or bad. Parents should gear conversations toward their

children's level of understanding. Parents should let their older children know that they understand that what they are going through must be tough.

***If children withdraw, parents should provide frequent reassurance and affection.**

***Set limits on anger and hostility.** Parent should define acceptable and not acceptable behavior. Parents should not leave children alone together unsupervised. If parents observe hostility, they should try not to scold or punish. Instead, they should redirect the behavior. Parents should reassure their older children that they are loved, that it's okay to be angry, but that it's not okay to hurt the baby.

***Be realistic.** Parents shouldn't expect their older children to smother their new baby with love and affection immediately. It will take time for older children to warm up to and get used to their new sibling.

***Try to sympathize with older children.** Parents should provide their older children with ways to express their negative feelings and thoughts by listening.

***Deal with negative or attention-getting behaviors immediately.** They won't go away if parents ignore them.

***Don't force older children to share their possessions.** Young children often have difficulty sharing their belongings. Increased rivalry will probably occur if older children who are upset by the arrival of a new sibling are asked to share their belongings with their new sibling.

Sibling rivalry is unavoidable. Whenever two or more children live together, there are bound to be conflicts and jealousy. Parents can't eliminate sibling rivalry. They can, however, help to minimize it. Expecting and preparing for this inevitability will help parents make life easier for themselves and for their children.



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