



Helping Children Adapt to a New Sibling

*"When does Joey go **back** to the hospital?"*

Most children welcome new siblings with excitement and affection, but the changes in their lives may also frustrate them. Both positive and negative feelings and behaviors are common in children when a new brother or sister arrives. For example, children may feel jealous and left out, but they may also feel a great deal of pride and affection for the new sibling. Here are five ideas -- based on current research -- that can help promote good sibling relations.

Timing plays a part

Parents often consider timing when they are planning a new child. Some experts believe that children between 18 months and three years old have the hardest time adjusting to new siblings. Children fewer than 18 months may have fewer problems because they don't realize how life is changing for them. Four- and five-year-olds have more mature social and cognitive skills, so they can handle frustrating situations better than three-year-olds can. Parents should think about these things, but they should make their decision based on what will work best for the entire family.

Prepare children for change

It's important to prepare children for a new child. Children will adjust better if they have been included in the preparations for the new arrival and have had the chance to explore their feelings and anxieties. Here are some ideas for preparing an older sibling.

- Read books about new babies. Some excellent books on this topic include *101 Things to Do with a Baby* (Ormerod, 1984, Puffin Books), *She Come Bringing Me that Little Baby Girl* (Greenfield, 1974, Harper Trophy) and *A New Baby at Koko Bear's House* (Lansky, 1987, The Book Peddlers). Ask your children's librarian for other recommendations.
- Introduce children to newborns and babies. When you see babies while shopping, at the park or at friend's houses, let children observe the babies and, if possible, interact with them. Talk about what a new baby can and cannot do.
- Take children to sibling preparation classes offered by many hospitals. They can see the maternity section and the nursery (if mother is going to the hospital). They can also learn what new babies are like and how to avoid hurting them.
- Rehearse some skills -- like holding, diapering, feeding -- with a large doll. Children can learn to rock, hug, cuddle and even feed and diaper a baby by practicing first on a doll.

- Teach children how they should **behave** with the new baby. Parents usually worry that older children will be too rough with the baby. Too often, they may emphasize things children should **not** do with babies. Parents should give more attention to showing children ways they can have a safe and enjoyable time together. An older child needs to know how to play with a baby, how they can communicate and how to handle conflict and frustration.
- Let children learn the skills that set the stage for good sibling relationships by playing with other children. Children who play well with their friends are more likely to develop good relationships with their siblings. When your child is playing with other children, note her ability to manage conflict. See if she helps to keep the emotional climate pleasant.

It's only temporary!

Some children regress when a new child arrives. Children may be more demanding, have more toilet accidents or they may have trouble sleeping. Although these problems can be annoying, parents shouldn't worry too much -- they usually disappear in three to five months.

Many children show signs of greater maturity when a new sibling arrives. They may take pride in showing that they are different from their little brother or sister because they can dress or feed themselves.

This is a great chance to praise children for helping in a stressful situation. Remember, though, that the same children who are showing off their new skills can also be showing immature behaviors.

It's not just luck when kids get along

A good sibling relationship is more likely if parents value it. Parents should think about the way they would like their children to behave with each other. Then they should help their children learn to behave that way. If parents think it's important that siblings share, they should look for opportunities to praise this behavior. For example, "I like the way you and Joey are playing together with that truck." If parents value closeness and affection between siblings, they should look for examples of this behavior to praise.

Parents should model the behavior they want to see in their children. They should avoid behavior that they don't want their children to imitate.

Help your child learn how to be a sibling

Help your children find a role to play with their new sibling. Possible roles include assistant caregiver, teacher, helper or playmate.

As assistant caregiver, a child could fetch diapers, help prepare the baby's meals or amuse the baby while waiting at the doctor's office. Don't push children into a caregiver role, though, if they don't want it. If you do, they may feel that being a sibling is only a burden. Help the child find a different role to play, or wait until the baby is older and the children can interact more successfully.

One last piece of advice

Babies seem to come into the world ready to adore their older siblings. Make sure your older children know how important they are to their brother or sister. It will give them a sense of pride and fosters mutual enjoyment.

Source: Laurie Kramer, Assistant Professor, Applied Family Studies, Human Development and Family Studies, University of Illinois; in Child Care Center Connections Newsletter, Vol. 4, Issue 5, 1995, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.