New Baby Sibling

Welcoming a new baby to your family is an exciting time, and one of great change! This is especially true when there is an older sibling in the home. Having a new baby in the family will be a significant adjustment for your older child. However, it may eventually be one of the greatest gifts you can give them.

There are many things that can contribute to a difficult adjustment:

- Research indicates that a child’s personality has the most effect on how they react to a new baby.
- Your child’s developmental stage may affect how well they can share your attention. Often two-year-olds have lots of trouble getting used to a new baby, because their needs for time and closeness from their parents are still significant.
- Stress on the family can make your older child’s adjustment harder.

How can I prepare my child (or children) ahead of time for their new baby sibling?

Here are some things you should do to help prepare your older child:

- Tell your child about your pregnancy when you tell your friends. Your child needs to hear about it from you, not from someone else.
If you plan to move your child to a new bed and/or bedroom, do so well before the baby arrives, so your older child doesn’t feel displaced by the baby. This also goes for any other major changes, like weaning, toilet training, and starting preschool or child care.

Check with your hospital about sibling preparation classes and hospital tours.

Give your child a realistic idea of what to expect when the baby first arrives. You will be tired, and the baby will take lots of your time. The baby will not be able to do much at first, except eat, sleep, poop, pee and cry. The baby will not be a playmate at first.

Visit friends with a new baby, if possible. Read books about pregnancy, birth, newborns, and baby siblings with your child (see below for some suggestions). Give them a chance to ask questions, voice concerns, and vent feelings inspired by the books.

Look at pictures of your older child’s birth and babyhood. Tell them how excited you were when they were born, and how everyone wanted to see them and hold them. Tell them what they were like as a baby.

Have your child practice holding a doll and supporting the head. Teach them how to touch and hold a baby very gently.

Let your child participate in preparations in any way possible. Give them choices, such as choosing the baby’s coming home outfit from two acceptable options.

Should your child be present for the baby’s birth? Many families have found this to be a very positive experience, but it is not necessarily right for every family. If you do decide to have your child at the birth, make sure you have an adult caregiver whose only job is to be there for the child. Prepare your child thoroughly by watching videos of births with them, bringing them to midwife or OB appointments, and talking with them about what it may be like. It may be nice to give them a special, age-appropriate job, such as cutting the umbilical cord or putting on the hat.

Difficulties with adjusting may express themselves a number of ways. Sibling rivalry sometimes starts right after (or even before) the arrival of the second child. Occasionally, the older child can become aggressive, “act out” or even regress, acting more like a baby.

How can I help my child adjust to the new baby once it’s here?

Set aside special time for your older child. Each parent should spend some one-on-one with the older child every day. It’s amazing how much even just 10 minutes of uninterrupted one-on-one time can mean to your child (and help their behavior!). Let your child choose the activity, and you follow their lead.

Listen—really listen—to how your child feels about the baby and the changes in your family. If they express negative feelings, acknowledge them. Help your child put their feelings into words. Never deny or discount your child’s feelings.

Make sure it is very clear that absolutely no hurting is allowed. Give your child other ways to express bad or angry feelings they may have toward the baby. For example, they could draw an angry picture of the baby, or act out their wishes with dolls, or roar like a lion.

“Baby” your child, if that’s what they seem to crave. This may help stave off regression in areas that are less acceptable to you. There is a tendency to suddenly expect your child
to become more independent when you have a new baby. If you expect less independence, you are more likely to get more!

- Have the new baby and older child exchange gifts.
- Have some special “big brother” or “big sister” gifts to give your child as friends and relatives start showing up with baby gifts, so your older child won’t feel left out.
- Remind visitors to pay attention to your older child, and not just the baby.
- Make sure the older child has some special, private space, and things of their own that they don’t have to share with the baby.
- Give them special jobs that they can do to help the family and help with the baby’s care (but don’t overdo it—take your cue from your child on this).
- Let them participate in the baby’s care—baths, dressing, pushing the stroller, etc.
- Point out the benefits of being an older child, like choosing what to eat, being able to go the park and play, and having friends.

Additional resources:

- [Preparing your child for a new sibling (link is external)](KidsHealth) (En Espanol)
- [Welcoming a new baby into the family (link is external)](KidsHealth) (En Espanol)

Suggested reading:

- From One Child to Two: What to Expect, How to Cope, and How to Enjoy Your Growing Family, by Judy Dunn
- Twice Blessed Everything You Need To Know About Having A Second Child--Preparing Yourself, Your Marriage, And Your Firstborn For A New Family Of Four, by Joan Leonard
- And Baby Makes Four : Welcoming a Second Child into the Family, by Hilory Wagner
- And Baby Makes 4, by Judith Benjamin

Suggested books for children:

**Toddlers:**

- We have a baby, by Cathryn Falwel. Simple text and illustrations. What can you do with a new baby?
- The new baby, by Fred Rogers. For toddlers and preschoolers. Nice photos of families working together and sharing.
- I am a big brother, by Caroline Jane Church
- Spot's baby sister, by Eric Hill
- Sisters, by Debbie Bailey & Susan Huszar
- Baby born, by Anastasia Suen

**Preschoolers:**

- How you were born, I’m a big brother and I’m a big sister, by Joanna Cole
• The new baby, by Mercer Mayer – helps young children know what to expect when baby comes and what they can do to help when the baby arrives
• 101 things to do with a baby, by Jan Ormerod.
• Will there be a lap for me? by Dorothy Corey. When a boy’s mother is pregnant, her lap gets smaller and smaller. After the baby is born, she is very busy, but she makes some special time for her older son.
• Alligator baby, by Robert Munsch. A silly spoof, where the older sister is the hero!
• A new baby at Koko Bear's house, by Vicky Lansky. Includes tips for parents at the bottom of each page.
• Oonga boonga, by Carol Thompson. The big brother is the only one who can calm the baby.

Preschool through school-age:

• Julius, the baby of the world, by Kevin Henkes. Lilly thinks all the attention given to her baby brother Julius is “disgusting,” but then she finds inside herself a fierce love and protectiveness.
• Arthur and the baby, by Marc Brown.
• Darcy and gran don’t like babies, by Jane Cutler. Darcy’s grandma helps her with her complex feelings toward the new baby.
• A baby sister for Frances, by Russell & Lillian Hoban.
• Welcoming babies, by Margy Burns Knight. Describes different cultures’ welcoming traditions.
• The new baby at your house, by Joanna Cole. Ages 3-6. Great photos and simple discussion of what it’s like to have a new baby, and older children’s feelings about the baby.
• Hello baby, by Lizzy Rockwell. Ages 4-8. An older brother explains the baby’s prenatal development and birth in simple, straightforward terms.
• My new baby and me: A first year record book for big brothers and sisters, by Dian Smith.
• Pinky and Rex and the new baby, by James Howe. For older school-aged kids. Rex’s family adopts a new baby, and she tries to be a perfect big sister, while worrying that her parents will forget about her.
• Being born, by Sheila Kitzinger and Lennart Nilsson. For older school-aged kids. Simple text and color photos explain conception through birth.

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