

Helping Your Child Adjust to the New Baby

By Judy Arnall



You've brought your lovely new baby daughter home from the hospital, and you eagerly show her to your three-year-old son, who pats the baby lovingly. Five minutes pass, and your son says, "Mommy, give the baby back to the hospital and come play with me!"

Whether the new baby is your second or fifth child, the whole family will have to go through an adjustment phase.

"Sibling rivalry is the natural, normal competition between brothers and sisters vying for their parents love and affection. It exists in every family to some degree," said Dr. Spock, the eldest of six children. The following information may help your family experience a smoother transition.

Before the new baby arrives

- Encourage your child to share your pregnancy with you by talking to the baby, visiting the doctor, and feeling the baby move. Take your child to the ultrasound visit.

- Read books or watch videos with your child, about pregnancy, giving birth, and having a new baby in the family.
- Arrange a caregiver and explain to your child who will care for them while you are giving birth.
- Make or buy a “welcome” present for your child to give to the new baby.
- Visit a friend with a new baby. If possible, watch breastfeeding.
- Avoid fostering unrealistic expectations about a new playmate.
- Put a picture of yourself in the child’s room.
- Speak of the baby as “ours.”
- Involve your child in choices, such as baby clothes, decorating.
- Show pictures and video of the child as a baby.
- The change in routine should be done well before the baby arrives: bedtime, clothes, toys, and Dad takes over some duties.

During the hospital stay or birth center

- Have a gift from the new baby to your child.
- Let the first visit at the hospital be “family” only.
- Have a camera ready for the child to take pictures.
- Have a framed picture of your child on the bedside table.
- Greet your child without the baby in your arms. Remember your child is anxious to see you, not the baby.
- Bonding tip: put your child’s finger in the baby’s palm. The new baby’s reflex grasp will hold on.
- Let your child hold the baby. Supervise!
- Let your child announce the news to family and visitors.

At home after the birth

- Discourage visitors for the first few days, if possible.
- Let your child come with Daddy to pick up Mom and baby at the hospital.
- Allow your child to take part in the baby’s care, according to their capabilities, and desire.
- Have a supply of wrapped gifts to give to your child when friends bring baby gifts.
- Talk about your child’s accomplishments to visiting relatives.
- Don’t force positive interaction. Your child may feel indifferent or negative towards baby.
- Older children can assist in making birth announcements or fill them out.
- Encourage your children to phone relatives and share the news first.

- Mom and Dad should spend time alone with each sibling, especially Mom.
- It's tempting to spend all the time holding the baby, but make the effort to put the baby down or hand off to the other parent and spend time with the older child.
- Learn ways to include the older child when caring and attending to the baby.
- Put a stool next to change table so the older sibling can see.
- Avoid sending the older child away to relatives and friends. They need to feel included and valued, not shoved off.
- Don't leave baby alone with the older child. Avoid leaving baby carriers on couches, tables.
- The more positive interaction the two siblings have, the sooner a bond will develop and grow. Ask yourself how you can foster attachment and bonding between the siblings when they are fighting and you need to step in and discipline.
- Give extra hugs, cuddles, smiles, patience, and understanding.
- Give your older child new privileges: later bed, pouring juice, things they like to do, help Mom with cooking.
- If you are stressed, get support rather than take it out on the children.
- Don't expect "older child" behavior from your child, such as waiting, crossing roads, etc., if they aren't ready.
- Avoid getting a new pet.
- "Tell" the baby the rules about hitting. It takes the attention off the child.
Say, "We don't hit. Right, baby?"
- Keep on going to the older child's activities as much as possible.
- Have a special basket of books, games, or toys to play with your child while nursing the baby.
- Don't blame lack of time on the baby. Use any other reason.
- Emphasize positives such as "Baby can't have juice; only big children get juice!" Point out that the older child can go to park and stay up later.
- Do your fussing, cooing, and awing over the new baby in private. Even if it's your fourth or fifth child, you will still do it!
- Interpret the baby's signals for your older child. "Look Johnny, baby is smiling at you! I bet he can't wait until you can play blocks with him."
- If the baby stops crying when the older child walks in the room, point out that the baby must have been very happy to see him.
- Emphasize the positives of the new family size: "Look, we fill the van now!" "Look, we have more people at our table." "Look, everyone gets more Christmas and birthday presents!"

Encourage communication

- Ask your child what they like/don't like about the new baby. Accept all responses. Don't answer with, "Yes, but..."
- Acknowledge the challenges, "Mommy sure spends a lot of time feeding the baby, right?"
- Be patient and reassure your child you will always love her, if she shows signs of jealousy, regression, or aggression.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings. You don't have to agree with him in order to accept and validate them. To help him express them, ask "How do you feel about the baby?" Have him draw a picture or give him a doll or puppet and ask him to show you how he feels. Your child will have mixed feelings, such as excitement, envy, anger, hope, indifference, or loss, especially of the "old" family and routines. Show him that all feelings are acceptable, although there are limits on behaviors. The more your child can express his feelings directly to you, the less chance he will act out in negative behavior to you or the baby.

Pretty soon your child and new addition will be playing together as friends and you will be glad that you gave your child the best gift ever – a sibling!

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