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Siblings: When the New Baby is Not So New Anymore

When a new baby sibling is on the way, parents often worry how their older child will react to the baby. They think about how to prepare the older child for the birth or homecoming, and how to balance each child's need for attention and care.

It has been our experience that older siblings often have what might seem to be a counter-intuitive sense of incredible relief when the baby finally arrives. Typically, the child has heard so much about The New Baby (what she will be like, where she will sleep, that she will cry a lot), and seen so much of the associated paraphernalia (the diapers, the blankets, the swing, the double-stroller), that the actual arrival of a small and helpless infant winds up being somewhat underwhelming. The older child may think, "All this fuss over THAT?!" and then go about his business.

For many families, however, the unexpected honeymoon can end as the younger sibling becomes more and more of a person. As the baby begins to participate more actively in the older child's world, opportunities for the sibling rivalry that so many parents dread begin to increase as well.

This may start when the infant begins to crawl and gains access to the older child's toys. It may worsen when the baby begins to talk or walk and always wants to be part of whatever her older sibling is doing. And it may worsen still when the younger sibling becomes a full-fledged toddler demanding more adult attention—both positive and negative—with charm, flirtation, naughtiness and temper tantrums.

As your younger child grows, your older child is asked to share lots of things, including you.

We hear many parents complain of regressions on the part of their older children that seem to go hand in hand with their younger child's progress.

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Parents say, “The baby is finally sleeping through the night, and now my older child keeps waking up and crying for me!” or “The baby is finally old enough to sit in a high chair at a restaurant, but my older child threw a tantrum and we had to leave!” Parents might see their older children asking to be babies again—refusing to dress or feed themselves, having bathroom accidents, or affecting a whiny helplessness.

In these cases, it is important to consider the older child’s point of view. He sees a baby or toddler sibling enjoying lots of adult attention and affection. He sees what the baby does to earn all of this fussing and cuddling, and he tries some of those things himself. The baby secures attention in part by not being able to do things (talk, feed herself, dress herself, use a potty, remember the rules, etc.); the older child is motivated at least to try this strategy out.

Some older children, instead of regressing, take on too much of an adult role toward younger siblings. They feel the need constantly to monitor and police younger siblings, setting the limits that really should be adults’ responsibility to set.

And, of course, some children take out their strong feeling by hitting or biting the younger sibling.

We have some suggestions of ways to help ease the stresses of this time for both parents and children.

1. Give your older child designated time. Your older child needs to enjoy the undivided attention of a parent on a regular basis, even if it’s only for 20 or 30 minutes. This means that there must be a time, preferably every day, when your younger child is asleep or being cared for by another adult and you can devote yourself fully to playing with your older child (turn off your phone!). Some parents find it helpful to use a kitchen timer to show the child that this is special time for him—you can say, “Until the buzzer rings, I’m playing with you and only you.”

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2. Give your older child designated space. It can be difficult in small apartments to give each child his or her own space. Many children share rooms, shelves, toy bins, etc. It is important for older children to feel that they can have at least some place that is off-limits to a younger sibling. This might be a special toy bin or a high shelf. You can say to your child, "This is only yours," and then enforce that rule.

3. Give your older child "baby-time" if he seems to want it. Let your child pretend to be a baby in the context of a game. He can crawl, baby-talk, be cradled by you. He can pretend to drink a bottle. Be sure to frame the play by saying, "Let's play a game where you're the baby," and when the game is over saying, "Ok, now you are a 3 year old again!"

4. Remind your older child of the benefits of being big. Your child is noticing all the perks of being a baby, and he may forget the perks of being big. Think of special ways to recognize your older child's growing skills and point out all that is available to him that is not available to his younger sibling. "It's too bad that Jane is still too little for the big slide; you're lucky that you get to go down it over and over!" HOWEVER, be sure that you don't use your child's status as a big boy or big girl in punitive or moralizing ways. If your child is upset by a bathroom accident and you say, "A big girl like you should remember to use the potty," or "Big girls don't cry about little things like this," it can just reinforce the notion that being "big" is not such a fun thing to be.

5. Be sure that adults are setting consistent limits at home. It is important for all of your children to know that adults are in charge and that rules remain consistent. One thing that helps your child adjust to his growing sibling is the knowledge that you are in charge of keeping home life safe and predictable. When you stop your toddler from breaking his older sister's Lego construction, you communicate to your older child that you value her work and space. Likewise, when you stop your older child from stealing her little brother's graham cracker, you communicate to her that you value fairness (even if it makes her angry in that moment). It is important that you set limits in a way that is firm but not overly punitive. When your older child grabs that graham

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cracker, for example, instead of simply scolding or moralizing, you might say, "I won't let you take the baby's cracker, but I'll get one for you."

6. Respect your children's range of emotions about their siblings. Even the smoothest of sibling relationships has its rocky moments. For the majority of children, there will be many times when they feel anger, jealousy, and resentment towards their siblings. We have all heard funny stories of older siblings who hope for the day when "the baby goes back to live at the hospital." It is important that parents avoid judging children for these strong feelings and avoid putting too much pressure on siblings to love one another or "be nice." It is enough to set clear expectations for behavior, while also validating feelings. For example, if the baby rips your older child's drawing, and the older child hits him, instead of saying "Hitting's not nice, now give your baby brother a hug and kiss;" you might say, "You are really mad at your little brother, but I won't let you hit."

There are many children's books that address the issues of younger siblings and ambivalence about growing up. Here are a few that we have in our school library:

Barney is Big
An Egg is an Egg
Darcy and Gran Don't Like Babies
Peter's Chair
Pig Pig Grows Up
Big Like Me
A Baby Sister for Frances
On Mother's Lap
The New Baby (Mr. Rogers)
Now I'm Big
Poor Carl

Meredith & Kate

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