



Helping Siblings Adjust to the New Baby

**(Adapted from Bright Futures in Practice, Mental Health;
Healthy Steps)**

So you're going to (or do) have ANOTHER baby! Congratulations! A new baby in the family is a great thing... Right? You are happy but you can't help wondering how this will affect your relationship with your older child or children. How will he adjust? Will she accept this new addition to the family or try to send it back? There are some things you can do to help a big brother or sister get ready and make this transition less bumpy. (No one can take out all the bumps but you can avoid some of the potholes).

During pregnancy:

- Tell your child that you are going to have a baby early enough so that they don't find out first from someone else and feel that you were keeping it a secret.
- Explain why you are having a baby without making it their responsibility. For example, "We really love children so we wanted another one," rather than, "We thought you would like a baby brother," (which won't be true every minute!).
- Make sure your child knows who will take care of her when you go to the hospital or birthing center.
- Give your child a chance to see newborn infants and learn about what they can (see, hear, feel, eat, sleep, cry) and can't do (play, smile, crawl, walk, feed themselves).
- Be honest about what is happening to the family and to you. Discuss what will happen when you go to the hospital for the birth
- Consider involving siblings in prenatal visits as appropriate (for example, meeting your obstetrician/midwife, looking at the ultrasound, visiting the hospital)
- Take your child to a sibling preparation class at your local hospital if possible.
- Use children's books to explain basic facts about conception, pregnancy, and birth
- Make major life changes well in advance (if appropriate)
- Wean your older baby from the bottle or breast (if it is time) and early in the pregnancy
- Begin toilet training if your child is about 2 1/2 and seems ready, but if you are going to deliver in a month or so you should probably wait until your child has adjusted to the baby
- Start your older child in a play group or preschool
- Give your older child a new bedroom
- Move her into a 'big kid' bed - help her celebrate it
- Give her a chance to spend some time away from mom, because once the baby comes you will have less time
- Refer to the baby as "our baby"
- Include your children in planning for the baby's homecoming. Consider helping your children pick out a new gift for the baby, involving them in decorating the baby's room, and taking them

with you while shopping for the new baby. While you are involving them in preparing, think about ways to make them also feel special, such as asking them if they would like to make changes to their own bedroom space, etc.

- Discuss the long-term privileges of being a big brother or sister, such as getting to stay up later, being looked up to by a younger sibling, and having a playmate.
- Say "I love you" a lot

At the hospital (if you get to spend the night):

- Let big brother or sister visit
- Have him/her bring the baby a present or draw a picture
- "Assign" an adult to him/her (not mom or dad, who will be either too tired or too taken with the new baby).
- Say "I love you" a lot
- Be prepared to answer your child's question "I want some too" when you are breast or bottle feeding after he has weaned. Perhaps the best response is to not be shocked by the question - a bit surprised, but agreeable to letting your older child try, with the idea that you will make babying available to him if he should need it... with the inner confidence that his drive to grow up and try out the big kid stuff will carry the day. You should know that if you act frightened or resist his bids to be babied he will redouble his efforts for the "forbidden fruit". When you say, "You will always be my baby" he is relieved and does not have to fight to assure himself that it would be available to him if he needs it.

At home:

- Avoid having your child hear any details about the birth which describe your pain or anxiety which he may blame on the baby.
- Encourage but don't force your child to hold or be photographed with the baby.
- Describe your new baby's needs and point of view to your older child to help her see the infant as a person.
- Provide opportunities for your child to help care for your infant with close supervision, but don't require that he help
- Even if they are not able they can be involved in things like choosing what diaper the baby should wear (some diapers have different pictures on the tapes)
- Praise any ways in which your older child helps, makes good observations about your infant, or is able to soothe or interest your infant.
- Show and say that you understand any angry feelings your older child has, but notice and limit aggressiveness promptly so that she knows that you will protect the infant from her impulses.
- Give your young child a chance to be your partner, taking care of his/her doll in concert with your care of the baby
- Arrange special "alone time" with her-without the baby-with each parent every day. Even if you are unable to do what your child wants at the moment you can acknowledge that "That's a good idea - we can do it during your 'special time'" - rather than saying what you feel - "can't you see I am working with the baby and have no time for you now?" Special time is doing something with your older child one-on-one. Do whatever he asks for (except watching TV together), but at a time you elect, and for a defined period of time that should be about 10 minutes (it helps to use a timer). By having a special name for the time together, you have created a useful exercise for your child: negotiating for your time using words, and being

confident that it will be available. Do not interrupt Special Time for any reason, so that your child feels valued.

- Expect your older child to be angry (with you or the baby). Also expect that your children will return to some behaviors you thought they had outgrown (for example, setbacks in toilet training, baby talk, or wanting a pacifier). Anticipate they will retest rules to see if they still apply. Assure them of your love and keep their routines as consistent and predictable as possible.