

SIBLING RIVALRY GUIDE for PARENTS

Managing sibling rivalry: Help your children learn to live together

Sibling rivalry is the natural jealousy that children feel as they compete for their parents' time, attention, love and approval. Children can learn many positive character traits as they interact with their brothers and sisters—including sharing, cooperation, expressing their ideas, and leadership skills. They can learn how to manage conflict and how to refuse to participate in undesirable behaviors. Regrettably, children can also learn negative traits such as bullying and aggression, so it is important for you to set the tone and the rules for the family. Here are some important thoughts and recommendations on the matter:

All children experience sibling rivalry. The child who is closely attached to his (her) parents often feels the most "displaced" with the arrival of a new baby in the home. The amount of distress a child experiences after the birth of a new sibling does not predict the quality of their later relationship, however.

Examine your own family background and relationships with your siblings. A bad experience in your childhood can affect how you treat your children. If you find yourself always labeling one child as "the trouble maker," for example, ask yourself if anything in your family history sheds light on this tendency.

Don't intervene in insignificant squabbles. Let your children work out their differences by themselves as much as possible. If the argument escalates, try identifying the emotions involved to help the children empathize with each other: "I see two children who both want to play with the same toy. That must be difficult." This approach may be enough to help your children resolve their differences.

If an argument escalates to physical fighting or name calling, intervene immediately. Children need to know that you are there to protect them. "In our home we do not hit or call names" is a powerful statement.

Prevent disagreements by anticipation and planning. Give children different chores to do. Set up a time arrangement for using special toys.

Reward positive interactions. Give stickers, pennies, or other small rewards when you see your children behaving positively—sharing, cooperating, problem solving.

Plan family activities that everyone enjoys.

Take turns allowing each child to decide the activity.

Do not compare your children with each other—favorably or unfavorably. It is not helpful for either child to hear "You cleaned up much better than your sister."

Do not try to treat your children equally. This only encourages them to make constant comparisons among themselves. Instead, let your children know that you will meet their needs. If one child complains that the other received a new pair of shoes, explain, "I will buy you a new pair of shoes when you need them. But right now, your shoes still fit you."

Most important, ***keep your marriage (or your relationship with your partner) strong.*** Research has shown that children experience less sibling rivalry when they see their parents behaving in a loving, caring manner. Be a good role model in working through differences.

For additional information, see *Siblings Without Rivalry* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (HarperCollins, 1998). This excellent resource for families—easy reading with lots of cartoons—will help you enjoy your children more.

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Sibling rivalry to the newborn **Help your child become a big brother or big sister**

Congratulations! As you look forward to the birth of your baby, you are probably experiencing a variety of emotions—excitement and anticipation about meeting your new infant, anxiety over how you will be able to meet the needs of both your children, and concern about how your older child will respond to the baby. We hope the information that follows will help your family enjoy this adventure.

Any change in the family can cause anxiety in a child who is accustomed to comfortable routine and attention. A new baby can make the older child feel that she (or he) has lost control of her world. During the early period of adjustment, expect that your firstborn may "regress" and show some behaviors normally seen in younger children. It's best not to push your child to try a new "grown-up" behavior, such as toilet training, while she is adjusting to the new baby.

Before Baby arrives

- If your child asks why you are having another baby, don't try to explain. Simply say that your family is having another baby.
- Allow your child to make many small decisions every day—such as choosing clothing, some foods, books to look at—so that he feels a continued sense of control in his life.
- Use words that convey emotions with your child so that she becomes used to hearing and using words such as "excited," "disappointed," and "sad." This will help her express her emotions with words rather than actions.
- Expect, and allow, your child to have "mixed-up" emotions about the new baby. Your child doesn't have to be excited and happy all the time. Let him know that it is acceptable to express disappointment that a new baby is coming (or has arrived).
- Choose some small gifts and wrap them so you will have a gift on hand for your older child to open when friends bring a gift for the new baby.
- Choose one nice gift for the baby to bring home from the hospital for the older brother or sister. ("Someone who brings me a gift can't be all bad!")
- ***Make certain*** that your older child is sleeping *now* in the same place he will be sleeping when the new baby comes home. Make any changes in sleeping arrangements several months before the baby's birth.

- Let your older child help you make choices for the new baby. Perhaps she can choose the color of the baby's blanket, pick out a new toy for the baby, or decide where the crib will be placed.
- Let your older child play with a doll so he can learn how to hold a baby properly. You can also teach him what "gentle" means: soft, slow, and quiet.
- Read books about becoming a big brother or sister with your child (such as *The New Baby at Your House* by Joanna Cole [Harper Trophy, 1997]). Lovely books that children can enjoy showing the unborn baby's development are also available (*From Conception to Birth: A Life Unfolds* by Alexander Tsiras [Doubleday, 2002]; *A Child is Born* by Lennart Nilsson and Lars Hamberger [Delacourt, 2003]). And you can show your child her own baby pictures.
- Set aside a special place—a box, a drawer, a cupboard—for the toys that your older child will not have to share. This is also a great way to keep small toys away from the baby.
- Let your older child go with Mom to medical appointments. Some hospitals have a sibling preparation class, which may be helpful.
- Mom may want to tape record herself reading bedtime stories so your child can listen to them while Mom is in the hospital.

While Mom is in the hospital

- Try to keep your older child's daily routine the same.
- If possible, let your older child come to the hospital to visit and hold the new baby. (And don't forget to bring home baby's gift to the older brother or sister.)
- When your child visits the hospital, Mom should greet him without the baby in her arms.
- Ask your older child to take care of something at home while Mom is in the hospital—watering a plant or caring for a pet will help your child feel valued and responsible.

After Baby comes home

- Let your older child hold the baby while sitting in a chair or on a couch so that the baby will be safe.
- Let your older child help take care of the baby—bring the diapers, put on lotion, choose an outfit for the baby to wear.
- When both children need you at the same time, take care of the older child first. He needs to know that you are still there to take care of him. The baby can wait for a few minutes for a feeding or diaper change.
- Talk to the baby about how wonderful his big brother or sister is ("Your big sister can ride a tricycle. She'll teach you when you're older.").
- Interpret the baby's behavior in a positive light for the older child ("See how the baby enjoys holding your hand. She likes you.").
- Let your older child hear you use words that express emotion ("I'm disappointed that I can't take you to the park right now.").
- Take pictures of your children, separately and together.
- Arrange your day so that you can spend some time alone with your older child. Give him extra hugs and kisses.

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