Preparing Your Older Child for a New Sibling

If you're introducing a new sibling, help your older child or firstborn adjust to the idea of an addition to the family.

By Dina Roth Port from Parents Magazine

There's nothing quite as joyous as bringing home a baby, but it can shift the family dynamic, especially if you already have a first child at home. If she's still too young to understand the concept of having a new sibling, expect jealousy, confusion, and even anger. Before and after the baby arrives, take these steps to help your older child adjust to the new family member and welcome her sibling with open arms.

Enlist Their Help

Older siblings love being "big helpers." Get them involved in choosing items for the baby before she arrives. Let them pick out a baby blanket and decide what color to paint the room. After the baby is home, assign simple tasks to your older child, such as picking out the baby's PJs or handing you a burp cloth during feeding and a diaper during changing time. By getting involved in caring for the younger sibling, your older child will feel more included and less jealous.

Role-Play Responsibilities

Some kids -- especially girls -- will enjoy having a baby doll of their own to care for, suggests Tanya R. Altmann, M.D., a pediatrician in West Lake Village, California, and author of Caring for Your Baby and Young Child. While you change the baby, have your older child mimic what you're doing on her doll. She can feed the doll (with a toy bottle) and pretend to burp it after. Or give her a better sense of what to expect by reading books. Curl up with The New Baby by Mercer Mayer or I'm a Big Brother or I'm a Big Sister by Joanna Cole.

Pour Out the Praise

Make a fuss about all the things your older child can do that the baby can't do yet -- such as reading books with Mommy, going for walks with Daddy, or even eating yummy foods like ice cream and pizza. This will help him realize that although the baby is new and unique, he's special in his own way, too. Of course, it's important to say positive things about the baby -- saying "She just smiled for the first time!" or "She finally slept through the night!" might help your older one establish a sense of pride in her little sister or brother.
Set Aside Special Time

Once the baby arrives, make sure you and your spouse spend plenty of alone time with the big sibling, says Jennifer Shu, M.D., a pediatrician in Atlanta, Georgia, and author of *Heading Home with Your Newborn*, doing so helps remind older children that while Mommy and Daddy do love the new baby, they still love the other kids just as much. You and your firstborn can grab a quick lunch together at home while the baby is sleeping or even go for a walk to a nearby playground. If necessary, ask visiting grandparents or relatives to help out with babysitting. Your infant will not know whether she spent every waking moment of her first few months with you -- but your older one might.

Walk Down Memory Lane

Whip out the photo album or videos of your older child as an infant. A visit to the past will help her understand what changes she might soon see or encounter in your household. Emphasize the importance of family and nurture a sense of belonging, by asking questions such as "I wonder, will the new baby have your nose? Or will he have more hair than you did? Or will her cries sound like yours did?"

Avoid Transitions

Most experts agree that parents should avoid any major changes in their older child's life -- the addition of a new sibling will be enough of an upheaval. You don't want him to associate the baby with the loss of familiarity and comfort, such as his crib, Binky, or diapers, for example. So if you're thinking of transitioning him to a toddler or big-kid bed, potty training, weaning off a Binky, changing babysitters, or moving to a new neighborhood, it's better to do so months before or after the baby arrives.

Be Clear and Honest

When you tell your firstborn she is going to become a big sister, say it with excitement, Dr. Altmann advises. But don't try to sugarcoat those early months. Explain that the baby will sleep most of the day and cry a lot, but that soon he'll be giggling, smiling, and ready to play. You might also want to say, "Mommy is going to be very tired when the baby first comes home, but that means we'll have extra snuggle time in bed together." If a child is too young to understand, you can still repeat words like "baby," "sister," or "brother" during the pregnancy to give her a sense of what's to come.

Pick Up Little Tokens

When you're in the hospital, give the big sibling a small gift and say it's from the new baby, Dr. Altmann suggests. You can also ask him to help pick out a present for his new brother or sister. Your child will feel more love and appreciation for the baby. Also, keep small toys and books on hand in case well-wishers bring gifts for the baby and not for the big sibling.

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