

SIBLING RIVALRY AND NEWBORNS

Definition

Sibling rivalry refers here to the natural jealousy of children toward a new brother or sister. Older siblings are most likely to be jealous if they are less than 3 years old when the baby arrives. Not surprisingly, most children prefer to be the only child at this age. The arrival of a new baby is especially stressful for the firstborn. The jealousy arises because the older sibling sees the newcomer receiving all the attention, visitors, gifts, and special handling.

The most common symptom of sibling rivalry is demands for attention: the older child wants to be held and carried about, especially when mother is busy with the newborn. Other symptoms include acting like a baby again (regressive behavior), such as thumb sucking, wetting, or soiling. Aggressive behavior - for example, handling the baby roughly - can also occur. All of these symptoms are normal. While some can be prevented, the remainder can be improved within a few months.

Prevention

During Pregnancy

- Prepare the older sibling for the newcomer. Talk about the pregnancy. Have her feel your baby's movements.
- Try to give your older child a chance to be around a new baby so that he has a better idea of what to expect.
- Encourage your older child to help you prepare the baby's room.
- If you are planning to move your older child to a different room or new bed,

do so months before the baby's birth. If she will be enrolling in a playgroup or nursery school, arrange for this to start well in advance of the delivery.

- Praise your older child for mature behavior, such as talking, using the toilet, feeding or dressing herself, and playing games.
- Don't make any demands for new skills (such as toilet training) during the months just preceding the delivery. Even if your child appears ready, postpone these changes until your child has made a good adjustment to the new baby.
- Tell your child where she'll go and who will care for her when you go to the hospital.
- Read books together about what happens during pregnancy and after the baby is born.
- Look through family photographs and talk about your older child's first year of life.

In The Hospital

- Call your older child daily from the hospital.
- Try to have your older child visit you and the baby in the hospital.
- If your older child can't visit you, send her a picture of the new baby.

Coming Home

- When you enter your home, spend your first moments with the older

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sibling. Have someone else carry the new baby into the house.

- Give the sibling a gift "from the new baby."
- Ask visitors to give extra notice to the older child. Have your older child unwrap the baby's gifts.
- From the beginning, refer to your newborn as "our baby."
- Encourage your older child to touch and play with the new baby in your presence. Allow him to hold the baby while sitting in a chair with side arms. Avoid such warnings as "Don't touch the baby." Newborns are not fragile and it is important to show your trust. However, you can't allow the sibling to carry the baby until he reaches school age.
- Enlist your older child as a helper. Encourage him to help with baths, dry the baby, get a clean diaper, or find toys or a pacifier. At other times encourage him to feed or bathe a doll when you are feeding or bathing the baby. Emphasize how much the baby "likes" the older sibling. Make comments such as "Look how happy she is when you play with her," or "You can always make her laugh."
- Give your older child the extra attention he needs. Give several 1-minute hugs throughout the day. Also, try to give him at least 30 minutes a day of exclusive, uninterrupted time. Hire a babysitter and take your older child outside or look through his baby album with him. Make sure that the

father and relatives spend extra time with him during the first month. If he demands to be held while you are feeding or rocking the baby, try to include him. At least try to talk with him when you are busy taking care of the baby.

- Accept regressive behavior, such as thumb sucking or clinging, as something your child needs to do temporarily. Do not criticize him.
- When your child behaves aggressively, intervene promptly and send your child to "time-out" for a few minutes. Don't spank your child at these times. If you hit him, he will eventually try to do the same to the baby for revenge. For the next few weeks don't leave the two of them alone.
- If your child is old enough, encourage him to talk about his mixed feelings about the new arrival. Explain that it is OK to feel angry with the baby sometimes, but it is never OK to hurt the baby.

Call our office during regular office hours if:

- Your older child tries to hurt the baby.
- Regressive behavior doesn't improve by one month.

Written by B.D. Schmitt, MD, author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books.

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