

How Older Kids Adjust to a New Sibling

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“Older siblings have a host of conflicting feelings about a new baby in the family.”

While many 5- and 6-year-olds are excited about the prospect of having a sibling, just as many of their friends already do, it's perfectly natural for them to feel jealous and resentful once the baby is born. To help your child learn to handle these complex emotions, you'll need to reassure him or her that even though the family is changing, their special place in it never will.

The way a 6-year-old reacts to the arrival of a rival is very different from the way a 2-year-old does, because cognitive skills are more advanced. Instead of simply crying or acting out to get attention, an older child may attempt to analyze the situation -- and given his or her simplistic worldview, they may conclude that the baby is more lovable than they are.

Because children assume that babies are privy to special treatment, they often think that the best way to get extra attention is to act like one. Like younger kids, 5- and 6-year-olds may temporarily regress -- sucking their thumb or wetting their bed, for example. Rather than focusing on curbing your child's babyish behavior, compliment her when she does behave maturely, and look for opportunities to point out the advantages of being the older one.

In fact, long before the little one arrives, you can start reinforcing the idea that being a big brother or sister is a big deal. Looking through photo albums and baby books and playing home videos of your child's early days can help him relate to what's about to happen. Try taking your child to a sibling course offered by the hospital where you are going to give birth. The kids are often given baby dolls to hold. It may help your child to see how small and helpless the baby will be and what kind of care she will need. It can answer a lot of questions and get your child excited about the baby's arrival.

Try bringing your child to a few obstetric checkups so that he or she can hear the baby's heartbeat, and may even get to see the baby during a late-term ultrasound. Try not to refer to the baby as "Mommy and Daddy's" but rather as "ours" or "your brother or sister." Also include the child in helping to pick the baby's name—which can instantly bond your child to the baby!

Try to prepare your child for some of the changes you'll have to make once the baby is born. If told about beforehand, it may make the transition smoother. Occasionally interrupt your activities together and ask your child how he or she would feel if a baby were to also be engaged in the activity. Check to see if your child thinks that he or she would be able to do certain things by themselves while you take care of the baby.

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Rather than focusing on how things are going to change when the baby comes -- because that can be frightening for your child -- ***talk about what will remain the same.*** The adjustment will feel less scary if he can count on keeping certain routines. Kids want to know who's going to tuck them in at night, for example, and how they'll get to school.

If your child makes such statements as "No one ever gets angry at the baby!" or "Grandma can't love us both the same!" she is probably comparing how you treat her with how you treat the baby. Similarly, your child might make negative remarks about herself, such as "I'm stupid," "I hate myself," or "I'm ugly". While your automatic response might be "Of course you're not stupid," you'll be more convincing if you say something specific, such as "Remember yesterday when you wrote your name and address? That was pretty smart!"

Suggestions for well-wishers:

- Remember to bring not only a baby gift, but a small item for the older child. Nothing pits kids against each other quicker than an unequal distribution of gifts!
- Pay attention to the older sibling—ask what he or she does to take care of the newborn, what he or she likes or dislikes about being the “older kid”, and what’s the most fun about having a baby in the house.
- Time your visits not only for the new mother and newborn, but also for the older sibling. Visiting later in the evening when the child is tired and perhaps grumpy may start the visit out on the wrong foot.