

Make Room for One More

By Marnell Jameson

A friend of mine, the eldest of five, remembers it like this: “Every time Mom had another baby, we got a new station wagon, and life got a little worse.” When he himself became a parent for the second time, his 4-year-old offered advice with a familiar ring: “Give the new baby to a family without children, or take her out with the trash.”

Ah, siblings. Blindsided by the joy of their newborn, many parents tend to overlook the impact that a new sibling has on an older child. “Kids think they’re supposed to feel joy, too, but what they really feel is angry, displaced and dethroned,” says Adele Faber, co-author of *Siblings Without Rivalry* (Avon, 1987). “It’s a terrible thing not to be the baby anymore. It means less of everything that kids desperately need — lap time, attention and space.”

While you can’t prevent your child from feeling this way, you can ease the heartache. Before baby arrives, discuss with your child any mixed feelings she might have. “Tell them a new baby is a mixed bag,” Faber says. “Part is fun and exciting, and part is hard. Discussing the ambivalence helps get feelings out in the open. And tell them to let you know if they ever feel less loved than the baby.”

Even the Best-Laid Plans Can Fail

Gil Schmidt, Psy.D., a Bakersfield, Calif., father, thought he knew best. A marriage, family and child psychologist, he had made sure his 4-year-old, Jessica, was included in baby preparations; she was encouraged to draw pictures of her pregnant mother and reassured that there was enough love to go around.

But not long after her brother arrived, Jessica hid him under her bed. When his mother heard the baby crying, she found him unharmed. Discovering a sheepish Jessica, she became aware of how displaced her daughter must have been feeling.

Such acts aren’t uncommon when an only child becomes an older child, says Mary J. O’Connor, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry at the University of California at Los Angeles and director of the UCLA infant and preschool service. All children handle the transition differently, but parents may find that older siblings want to send the new baby back, that they demand more attention and, sometimes, that they show aggression toward the baby. Less common and more worrisome signs include social withdrawal and regressive behavior.

Smoothing the Transition

To minimize the difficulties, Faber and O'Connor offer these tips:

- Involve the child in preparing for baby's arrival. Encourage her interest.
- When you introduce your older child to his sibling, let someone else hold the baby. Have your arms open and ready to greet your "first baby."
- Let the siblings exchange "birthday gifts." Have a gift ready to give your older child from the baby, and have the older child choose something special to give the baby.
- Give older children — including boys — a doll they can feed, care for and love.
- Use the children's names, as opposed to "big sister" and "baby."
- As soon as possible, schedule a special outing for your older child with one or both parents. Make it a regular occurrence, and tell the older child how much you enjoy the time together.
- Relax. Don't be overly protective of the newborn, and include the older child in caring for the baby.
- Acknowledge your child's negative feelings without scolding.

How to Handle the Hurt

When you feed or cuddle your baby and the older sibling is within earshot, talk to the baby about him. "Do you know what a terrific brother you have? He's going to teach you so much!"

Be ready to put the baby down for a minute if the older child expresses hurt. Embrace the older child and mirror his feelings: "This baby hurts you. I'm glad you told me. Do you need a kiss?" Or "You don't want her here, but she's a member of the family now. I wouldn't let anybody take you back."

If the older child takes aggressive action that could harm the baby, try not to show your alarm. "Treat it like any other negative behavior, with a timeout and a talk," O'Connor says. "But never leave your baby alone in the same room with a sibling under 5."

Amid their child's outbursts and tears, parents can console themselves by remembering the gift they've given their firstborn. "Younger children teach firstborns a lot," says Jackie Rosenberg, a child-development specialist in Sherman Oaks, Calif. "Older children learn they are no longer the center of the universe, that they need to care for others and share."

And that's one baby gift that will last a lifetime.