

SIBLING RIVALRY TOWARD A NEWBORN

Sibling rivalry refers here to the natural jealousy of children toward a new brother or sister. Older siblings can feel jealous when the baby arrives until they are 4 or 5 years old. The arrival of a new baby is especially stressful for the firstborn and for siblings less than 3 years old. 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 lots of 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 can be improved within a few weeks.

After delivery try to call your older child daily from the hospital. If they're not sick, 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. Encourage Dad to take your youngster on some special outings at this time (for example, to the zoo, museum, or a PawSox game).

When you enter your home, spend your first moments with the older sibling. Have someone else (like Dad) 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.'

Give your older child extra attention to help him feel more important. Try to give him at least 30 minutes a day of exclusive, uninterrupted time. Hire a baby sitter to care for the baby 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. When you are nursing or bottle-feeding the baby, read a story, play a game, or do a puzzle with your older child.

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 fourth or fifth grade.

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. Emphasize how much the baby likes the older sibling. Make comments such as "Look how happy she gets when you play with her," or "You can always make her laugh." Don't ask the older siblings to be quiet for the baby. Newborns can sleep fine without the house being perfectly quiet. This request can lead to unnecessary resentment.

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. Tell him, "We never hurt babies." Send your child to 'time-out' for a few minutes. Don't spank your child or slap his hand at these times. If you hit him, he will eventually try to do the same to the baby as 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. Suggest an alternative behavior: "When you're upset with the baby, come to me for a big hug."