

# SIBLING RIVALRY TOWARD A NEWBORN

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## DEFINITION

Sibling rivalry refers here to the natural jealousy of children toward a new brother or sister. Older siblings can feel jealous when a new baby arrives until they are 4 or 5 years old. Not surprisingly, most children prefer to be the only child at this age. Basically, they don't want to share your time and affection. The arrival of a new baby is especially stressful for the first-born child and for those less than 3 years old.

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 Mom 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. Although some can be prevented, the remainder can be improved within a few months.

## PREVENTION OF SIBLING RIVALRY

### During Pregnancy

- Prepare the older sibling for the newcomer. Talk about the pregnancy. Have him feel your baby's movements.
- Try to find a hospital that provides sibling classes where children can learn about babies and sharing parents. 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.
- Move your older child to a different room or new bed several months before the baby's birth so he won't feel pushed out by the new baby. If he will be enrolling in a play group or nursery school, start it well in advance of the delivery.
- Tell your child where he'll go and who will care for him when you go to the hospital, if he won't be home with his father.
- Read books together about what happens during pregnancy as well as 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. Many hospitals will allow this.
- If your older child can't visit you, send him a picture of the new baby.
- Encourage Dad to take your youngster on some

special outings at this time (e.g., to the park, zoo, museum, or fire station).

### Coming Home

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

### The First Months at Home

- Give your older child the extra attention he needs. Help him feel more important. Try to give him at least 30 minutes every 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. Give him lots of physical affection throughout the day. If he demands to be held while you are feeding or rocking the baby, try to include him. At least talk with him when you are busy taking care of the 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 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 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.
- Intervene promptly for any aggressive behavior. Tell him that "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. Give him an alternative behavior: "When you're upset with the baby, come to me for a big hug."