Introducing the new baby to your children

Having a new baby is an exciting and challenging time for the entire family. Yet even if you have planned, prepared and discussed this with your child or children, the fact remains; a new baby will change the family dynamic. Since even a welcome change can be stressful, it's vital that you think about how your other children will feel, and develop a strategy for introducing them to the new baby.



Before the baby is born

The arrival of a new brother or sister is an enormous change and one that siblings soon realize is irreversible. Although you can never predict exactly how your children will react to a new sibling, try to put yourself in their shoes. How would you feel if you suddenly lost the coveted position as the centre of attention?

Even if you try to maintain their daily routine and do your best to involve them with the new baby, the change in family dynamic will definitely cause some resentment and jealousy. But by preparing your children in advance and involving them in the pre-planning, you might at least prevent them from feeling left out, quell their fears and reassure them that they are still very important.

Here are some things to consider in preparing your other children for the new sibling's arrival:

Get older siblings involved in:

- Shopping for nursery items or baby clothes
- Attending baby showers
- Preparing the baby's room
- Picking baby names
- Attending doctor's appointments
- Learning to care for a baby by practicing with a baby doll
- Enrolling them in siblings' classes offered at some hospitals

Provide information about:

- How the baby is growing
- How the baby will be born (information geared to the child's age/understanding)
- How to care for a new baby
- How your family life and routine will be altered
- Who will be caring for them when mom is at the hospital

Make them feel special:

- Consider having a T-shirt printed with something like: "I'm a big brother/sister"
- Let them choose a gift for the baby, a birthday cake and/or balloons to take to the hospital or to have when the baby arrives home
- Buy him or her a present and have little treats on hand for when people bring presents for the baby

The birth day

On this big day, call older siblings and tell them the news first. Make plans to have them come to the hospital as the first visitors. If possible, let them hold the baby (with assistance) and take pictures of the children together.

To make older children feel part of the homecoming event, consider letting them:

- Decorate the house, draw a picture for you and/or the new baby, hang a "welcome home" sign, etc.
- Help you settle the baby into his/her new room
- Open presents sent to the baby

Once everyone is settled back in at home, be sure to spend alone time with your older children and tell them how proud you are of their wonderful job as a new big sister or brother.

Getting into a new daily routine

If you have older children who want to help with the baby, try involving them in his or her daily care routine. This will help them feel involved, give them a sense of accomplishment and bring them closer to their new sibling. Children can:

- Choose the baby's clothes
- Help change diapers
- Help with bath time
- Prepare for bedtime
- Push the baby carriage

What to expect from older children

It’s perfectly normal for your older child's behaviour to regress. This can include bedwetting, wanting a bottle or to be breastfed, speaking in baby talk or crying more frequently. After all, they see you paying a lot of attention to another baby, so why not try the same tactics?

Older children might also begin to have frequent temper tantrums as a means of getting your attention. Unless the behaviour is violent or directed at the new baby, try to humour your children. Be sure to continually let them know they are still loved and are very special too. Find time to spend solely with your older child and try hard to maintain as much of your old routine as you can. If your child seems angry or hurt, encourage him or her to talk about their feelings or draw pictures to illustrate, so you can help them deal with their emotions.

If you have more than one older child, they might also start quarrelling more among themselves because of changes in the family dynamic and the added tension they're feeling. Help them understand that feelings of resentment or jealousy toward the new baby are normal. But be clear on limits for appropriate behaviour.

Involving all of the siblings of a family in the preparations and birth of the new brother or sister can be challenging, but also rewarding and therapeutic. This joyful shared experience can create a stronger family bond, and will ease the adjustment in welcoming a new baby into the family.