

# Sibling Rivalry Toward a Newborn

## Definition

- Sibling rivalry refers to the normal jealousy of young children toward a new brother or sister.
- The most common symptom is increased demands for attention. For example, the older child wants to be held and carried, especially when the mother is busy with the newborn.
- Other symptoms are from regression and wanting to act like a baby again. For example, thumb-sucking or wetting may occur.
- Aggressive behavior -- for example, handling the baby roughly -- is less common but cannot be permitted.
- Some sibling rivalry can be prevented, and most can be improved within a few months.

## Health Information

### Cause

- Not surprisingly, most young children don't want to share your time and affection.
- 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.

## Care Advice

### Before Newborn Comes Home - Prevention of Sibling Rivalry

- 1. During Pregnancy - Prepare the Sibling for the Newcomer:**
  - Talk about the pregnancy. Let your child feel your baby's movements.
  - Try to give your child a chance to be around someone's new baby so that he has a better idea of what to expect.
  - Encourage your child to help you prepare the baby's room.
  - Move your child to a different room or new bed several months before the baby's birth.
  - Start any new play group or nursery school well in advance of the birth.
  - Don't make any demands for new skills close in time to the delivery.
  - Tell your child where she'll go and who will care for her when you go to the hospital if she won't be home with your partner.
  - Read books together about what happens during pregnancy and after the baby is born.
  - Look through family photos and talk about your child's first year of life. Look through his baby album with him.
- 2. In the Hospital - Involve the Older Child:**
  - 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 her a picture of the new baby.
  - Encourage Dad to take your youngster on some special outings during this time. Examples are to the park, zoo, museum, or fire station.

3. **Coming Home for the First Time - Spend First Moments with the Older Child:**
  - 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 - Prevention of Sibling Rivalry**

1. **Give Your Older Child Extra Attention:**
  - For the first few months after coming home, help your older child feel more important than the baby. Try to give him 30 minutes a day of exclusive, uninterrupted time when the baby is sleeping. Make sure that the father and relatives spend extra time with him during the first month. Give him lots of hugs and physical affection throughout the day.
  - When you are busy attending to the baby, try to include your older child. When you are nursing or bottle-feeding your baby, mainly focus on your older child. Read or make up a story. Have a silly conversation. Even play a game.
2. **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 your baby.
3. **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. Asking your older child to do this may cause him or her to resent the baby. Newborns can sleep fine without the house being quiet.
4. **Praise Your Child for Mature Behavior:**
  - Praise your child for mature behavior. Examples are talking, using the toilet, dressing herself, and playing games.
  - Accept baby-like behavior, such as thumb sucking or clinging, as something your child needs to do temporarily. Do not criticize him.
5. **Encourage Your Older Child to Interact with the Baby:**
  - Encourage your older child to touch and play with the new baby in your presence.
  - After a few months, allow him to hold the baby while sitting in a chair with sidearms.
  - 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.
6. **Stop Aggressive Behavior:**
  - If your child behaves aggressively, stop him right away. 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.
  - Safety: Don't leave younger sibs alone with a baby during the first 12 months or so.
7. **Help Your Child Talk About Their Feelings:**
  - 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."

## Call Your Doctor If

---

- Your child tries to hurt the baby
- Your child's sibling rivalry is not improved after using this plan for 4 weeks
- You have other questions or concerns

### **Pediatric Care Advice**

**Author:** Barton Schmitt MD, FAAP

**Copyright 2000-2022** Schmitt Pediatric Guidelines LLC

**Disclaimer:** This health information is for educational purposes only. You the reader assume full responsibility for how you choose to use it. The information contained in this handout should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. Listing of any resources does not imply an endorsement.