

PARENTS' GUIDE TO BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Sibling rivalry toward a new baby

By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

THE PROBLEM

Sibling rivalry refers here to the natural jealousy of children toward a new brother or sister. Older siblings can feel jealous about a baby's arrival 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 firstborn and children under 3 years old. 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. He may start acting like a baby again (regressive behavior), by thumb-sucking, wetting, or soiling, for example. He may handle the baby roughly or, on occasion, act aggressively toward other children or you. All of these symptoms are normal. Some can be prevented; the remainder can be improved within a few months of the new baby's birth.

THE SOLUTION

Lay the groundwork during pregnancy. Prepare the older sibling for the newcomer: Talk about the pregnancy, have the older child feel the baby's movements, and encourage her to help you prepare the baby's room. Tell her who will care for her when you go to the hospital and where she will be staying if she won't be at home with her father.

If your older child will be moving to a different room or new bed, make the move several months before the baby's birth so she won't feel forced out by the new baby. If she will be enrolling in a play group or nursery school, have her start well in advance of the delivery.

Praise your older child for mature behavior, such as talking, using the toilet, feeding or dressing herself, and playing games. Don't make any demands for new skills (such as toilet training) during the months just preceding the delivery, however. Even

if your child appears ready, postpone these changes until she has made a good adjustment to the new baby.

Stay in touch with your older child while you are in the hospital. Call your child from the hospital every day, and try to have him visit you and the baby. Many hospitals allow this. If your child can't visit you, send him a picture of the new baby. This is a perfect time for dad to take your youngster on some special outings, such as to the park, museum, zoo, or fire station.

When you come home from the hospital, 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." From the beginning, refer to your newborn as "our baby." Ask visitors to give extra attention to your older child, and have the older sibling unwrap the baby's gifts.

Encourage your older child to touch and play with the new baby in your presence. Allow her to hold

DR. SCHMITT is director of consultative services, The Children's Hospital, Denver, and professor of pediatrics, University of Colorado School of Medicine.

SIBLING RIVALRY

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 in the older child. However, you can't allow the sibling to carry the baby until the sibling reaches school age.

Enlist your older child as a helper. Whenever possible encourage him to help with baths, dry the baby, get a clean diaper, or find toys or a pacifier to amuse her. 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."

Give your older child the extra attention she needs. Help her feel more important. Give her at least 30 minutes of exclusive, uninterrupted time each day. Hire a baby-sitter and take your older child outside or look through her baby album with her. Make sure that her father and relatives spend extra time with her during the first month. Give several long hugs throughout the day. If she demands to be held while you are feeding or rocking the baby, try to include her. At least talk with her when you are busy taking care of the baby.

Accept regressive behavior. Look upon behavior such as thumbsucking or clinging as something your child needs to do temporarily. Do not criticize him.

Intervene promptly for any aggressive behavior. Tell your child, "We never hurt babies." Send her to "time-out" for a few minutes. Don't spank her or slap her hand at these times. If you hit her, she will eventually try to do the same to the baby out of revenge. If such an incident occurs, don't leave the older child alone with the baby for a few weeks. If your child is old enough, encourage her to talk about her mixed feelings toward the new arrival. Give her an alternative behavior: "When you're upset at the baby, come to me for a big hug."

Call our office during regular hours if:

- Your older child tries to hurt the baby.
 - Regressive behavior doesn't improve after one month.
 - You have other questions or concerns.
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Adapted from Schmitt BD: *Your Child's Health*. New York, Bantam Books, Inc., 1987.

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