

Tips for Sibling Preparation

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Before The Baby/ In the Last Trimester

1. Point out babies all the time to your child. Point out all the things they see babies doing. This is the best way for the expectant sibling to learn what babies are like. Ask questions and make statements about what they are seeing.
For example- Do you hear that baby crying? Babies cry when they need something. What do you think that baby needs? If your child does not answer or is not old enough to answer, you might say- Maybe the baby is hungry and his mommy is about to feed him. Maybe the baby has a dirty diaper and her daddy is about to change it.
2. Invite the older child to touch and talk to your baby through the belly. If baby moves when big sister or brother talks or touches your belly- you can say, "Look the baby says hi to you, or the baby likes that!"
3. Look through their baby book and talk about what it was like to take care of them as a baby, and what they were like as a baby. Talk about the easy and the hard stuff. This will help them learn what to expect and will not be so surprised when you need to spend a lot of time taking care of baby.
For example- When you were a baby you would cry when you needed something. We would pick you up and figure out what you needed. Sometimes you were hungry and we would breastfeed/ bottlefeed you. Other times we needed to change your diaper. When you first smiled we felt, when you first laughed, crawled, walked etc...
4. Read stories about babies and about becoming an older sister or brother. Check your local library for books on babies and becoming an older sibling. If your older child has friends that have younger siblings that they like/ get along with, encourage them to ask them what it is like.
Excellent books you can find in the Santa Clara County Library system-
When You Were a Baby by Katharine Ross
The New Baby by Fred Rogers
I'm a Big Sister/ I'm a Big Brother by Joanna Cole
5. Ask the older child to help you get ready for the baby- maybe they can help put away the diapers, help you decide between two paint colors, or help you pick out clothes and toys for the baby. This should not be work for them, but something fun! Remember when you ask for help, you need to be prepared for them to say no thank you. Make sure that choices you offer are really choices, and that they are equipped to do the job you are asking.
6. When you are at 34-36 weeks it is time to discuss what they will be doing while you are birthing baby.
Examples- When mommy's belly starts to do belly squeezes it means baby will be ready to come out. Mommy and daddy will go to the part of the hospital where babies are born. Grandma will come over and play with you while we are gone. She has a special project for you to do together. You guys are going to have so much fun!
OR
When mommy's belly starts to do belly squeezes it means baby will be ready to come out. Our midwife will be coming to our house to help us with the baby coming. It takes awhile for babies to come out, so Auntie will come over and take you to the park for awhile and do a special project with you too. It will be so much fun!

Mommy is in Labor

Have a plan for how much labor you will want your child to see and prepare them for it. Keep in mind your child will likely have children one day and your example will be a part of what they deem normal. Also think seriously how well you will labor with your child watching if you choose to have them see some or all. Preparing them to see some or all may include- talking about how mom's belly will squeeze and how mommy may make funny faces or noises, mommy may need to move around, may need privacy, may need some massage or heat packs. You might share books about the baby being in the uterus and how they come out and/or gentle birth videos. Discuss this with your partner far beforehand to see what you are comfortable with and make a plan.

Have someone that your child trusts and enjoys to either babysit them at your home while you are at the hospital or someone to hang out with them if you are laboring at home. Help that person to think of a special project to do with your child that they will both enjoy. Some project ideas include- baking and decorating a birthday cake for baby, making a poster or card, creating a special art project with clay or paint, playing a new game, picking out a new toy, watching a movie with popcorn, or anything else that is special and fun.

First Introduction to Baby

in Hospital/ Birth Center

Have the adult that is bringing your older child to visit sit in the waiting room until you call them to come in. Make sure that new baby is clean, fed, and happy before inviting big sister/brother in. Have baby in the bassinet, not in your arms, when older sibling enters. A child who enters a room with their father and mother holding a new baby for the first time can view it as they have been replaced or they do not fit in the family anymore. Greet your older child with a big hug and kiss, tell them you missed them and how much you love them. Ask them questions about what they did while away. Shower your older child with attention for at least 15 minutes before asking them if they would like to meet their new baby sister/brother. Some children may ask about their sibling before that 15 minutes is over, then it is ok to introduce them right then. If your older child has not asked about the baby during your greeting, you can invite them to see their sibling after you have thoroughly greeted them. Many children will be happy to meet the new baby and will be interested in touching and holding the new baby. Some children will take one look and not show any interest to do anything further. It is important to stay positive if your child shows little interest or is negative about the new baby.

At Home

If your child sees their sibling born and was involved in the process, you will not need to do the above description for the first introduction. Likelihood they will be invited to touch and see the baby right after birth and feel involved in the new baby coming into the world.

Bringing Home Baby from Hospital or Birth Center

If you can, bring home baby as a family. Have the person watching your older child, drop them off with you at the hospital and involve the older sibling in the bringing home of baby. It may be a little more work, but then the older sibling feels involved in the homecoming of their sibling. When you get home you can ask your older child if they would like to give baby a tour, or show them a favorite toy (with your assistance of course).

If you can not have the older sibling help bring home baby, then make sure when you get home you spend time greeting, hugging/cuddling, and letting them know you have missed them- baby free.

Invite The Older Sibling to Touch, Hold, and Interact with Baby

If baby is an untouchable object to your older child it will create jealousy and aggression. Show your older child how to gently touch the hands and feet of the baby. Help them hold the new baby with whatever support is required for their age and skill level. If you look anxious and scared, it will make your older child feel as if you do not trust them. You will need to teach your older child how to gently touch the baby and when it is appropriate.

Positive reinforcement helps the older child to learn how to interact appropriately with their new sibling.

Here are some examples of language that encourages positive interactions-

Look how the baby listens so carefully when you talk to them! The baby likes hearing your voice.

The baby seems to really like that gentle touch you are giving her/him, thank you.

Look at how when you make a silly face the baby copies you (or smiles at you), they know you are their big sister/brother.

Ideas to Entertain the Older Child While Caring for the Younger

If your child likes to help around the house you can ask them to help with caregiving. Some ideas how they might help- bring you a diaper, help you pick out the babies outfit from a few preselected outfits, sing a song to baby while you dress them or change their diaper, make funny faces at baby, older children might help burp the baby, push the stroller, or even help dress them.

Diaper puppets are pre and post diaper changing entertainment.

When you need to nurse baby have some books, puzzles, or quiet games that you can do with your older child while they sit next to you.

Tip toe silent tag with sleeping baby in a baby carrier. You get a little exercise and your older child is entertained while baby takes a nap.

Create a space in your home where babies are not allowed. Maybe it is a kid sized table in the corner of a room where they can do art projects or take toys to play. Perhaps they have their own bedroom that they can escape to when they would like some time without baby. This will become very important when the youngest learns to crawl.

Visitors

Before visitors come to see the new baby, ask them to please spend 15 or more minutes with the older sibling first before meeting the new baby. Let them know the conversation should be focussed on the older sibling and what they have been doing and not on the baby. Many children will begin to talk about the new baby or ask the visitor if they want to meet the baby, then is a good time to let them do just that. If after 15 minutes or so the older child has not mentioned the new baby, the visitor can let the older child know they would like to meet the baby.

If visitors bring a gift for the baby and not the older sibling, you might want to have some pre-wrapped stashed gifts for the guest to give to them. The gifts do not need to be elaborate, a new shirt, a book, or things that they need. After all the baby usually gets gifts of what they need. If you have a new baby registry, you might add a link for your new sibling registry as well.

Tips for Reducing Negative Behaviors

No matter how much planning you do, it is likely you will get at least a little bit of negative behavior from the older sibling. Here are some tips to reduce it and help them cope with the powerful new feelings they are having.

Do your best to keep the same schedule and routine. If schedule changes are needed try to do them a few months before the baby comes.

Be firm with preexisting rules and discipline. Older children sometimes retest the limits and need to know that the rules are still the same. This provides them with a sense of security. Not being consistent with discipline adds to the sense of unbalance and insecurity.

Children need to have ways to express themselves. Ask your child how they are feeling about the new baby. Be prepared for hard answers- like I do not like the baby. Accept their feelings as is, and reassure them that your love for them and the baby remains the same.

Give an outlet for expressing hard feelings. Especially for young children who use their whole body to express stress and frustration. If your child begins to show inappropriate physical expression, firmly tell them the rules and then offer them a solution.

For example- No hitting/biting people. If you need to hit/bite, here is a pillow.

You can talk to me in a calm voice. If you need to scream you can do it in your room.

Other good solutions for a high need to be physical- soft blocks to topple over, paper to rip, running, scribbling on paper, etc.

Find daily time, without distractions, that you can focus completely on the older sibling. Ideally you will spend at least an hour a day, if you have to split the time throughout the day that will work too. No- baby care, answering the phone, computer, TV, and video games at this time. This time is for positive interactions only! Spend time cuddling and reading together, go for a walk to the park, and/or do an art project or activity your child enjoys. The important part is that they have your undivided attention and that the time spent is fun and happy for the both of you.

Common Reactions from Older Sibling

Many children transition easily and quickly to their new sibling. The challenge is when they do not. It is common for young children to express stress at these times in baby's development- baby starts to coo and smile, sits up and reaches, starts to crawl, learns to walk, and learns to talk.

Usually children show their stress and frustration over a new baby in one or more main ways-

Aggression towards baby and/or parents.

Ambivalence toward baby and/or parents.

Reverting to baby like behavior.

Suggestions above can be helpful in these situations. I would also recommend reading some great discipline books-

Parenting Young Children (STEP) by Dinkmeyer and McKay

The Discipline Book by Dr Sears