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Avoiding Sibling Rivalry Part 1- The Arrival of a New Baby

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. She can be reached at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com

When my mother taught pre-school, she had a unique way of suggesting how parents could prepare children for the arrival of a new baby in the family. She asked parents to imagine a man coming home one day to announce excitedly to his wife: "Guess what! We're going to have a new wife soon. She'll be part of our family and it will be so much fun! She'll share your clothes and your bathroom, and she'll be such good company for you. And since you're the older wife, you can help a lot with her care."

How you set the tone for the addition of a new sibling can be significant. You want to be positive, of course, but it helps to minimize your excitement when talking to your child, since he might not be quite as enthusiastic as you. You can use this opportunity to tell your child how lucky the new baby will be to have him for an older brother. You can point out how the baby might be a nuisance at first. She will probably cry a lot, wake up in the middle of the night, need to wear diapers, spit up, etc. In other words, she won't be much fun for awhile, until she's a bit older. Ask your child if he has questions or concerns. Then casually ask him again as time goes by.

When the baby arrives it helps to have a gift for your older child from the baby. If your child is young enough, he won't question how the gift came about. If he's older, you can gloss over the details and just say it's an older brother gift. You can also keep some small gifts on hand for the big brother so that when the baby receives gifts in the mail or from visitors, he will receive something too.

When your son holds the baby or shows her a toy, you can say "Look how Tia loves you! She's looking right at you. She's so lucky to have you." And if the baby is smiling early (possibly because she has gas), you can seize on this and point out how the baby is smiling at him. Try and speak for the baby to your son in these kinds of loving ways. Catch him in the act of being kind and attentive to her and reinforce this behavior. Encourage him to help with her in any way he wants that is safe and age-appropriate.

Be sure to let your son overhear you talking to people about how wonderful he is with his baby sister. There's something about eavesdropping on a conversation and hearing something positive said about oneself that is even more powerful than being told the very same thing directly. (As a matter of fact, it is crucial for children to only hear you speak highly of them to others. Complaints and worries need to wait until you are certain they aren't listening).

When you are out with your children and someone stops you to fuss over the baby, be sure to speak up and insert your older child into the conversation. Too often, we let the person who initiates the conversation take control. If someone approaches you to comment on the new baby, you can say, "Thanks, we're really enjoying her. And she is so lucky to have such a wonderful brother. He's so patient with her, and he shows her toys and books. He's even helping with her bath." Sure, the person you're talking to may wonder why you switched the focus to your son and are rambling on a bit, but in this situation you want to be more concerned with the one who matters the most to you.

In most cases the older child sets the tone for the sibling relationship, since younger children naturally want to please and be accepted by the older sibling. If you can elicit his cooperation and "buy-in," you've got a good foundation on which to build.

Reach the reporter at: margierye@yahoo.com

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