

Helping Kids Adjust to Life With the New Baby

POSTED BY JANET ON APR 9TH, 2013

I'd just landed at LAX and was waiting at the baggage claim carousel when I heard an angry exchange. I turned toward the adjacent carousel and saw a three or four-year-old girl decked out in a colorful traveling ensemble – brightly patterned leggings, a trendy t-shirt and pink plastic movie star sunglasses. She seemed to be fumbling for something in her polka dot backpack while her father glared at her and seethed, “Just *be nice*. Be nice to your sister!”

Several feet away stood her mother, who also glared as she held baby sister (about 12 months old) in her arms. The girl kept her composure but avoided her parents' gaze. She seemed alone and vulnerable — a “problem child” estranged from her family.

If this mini-snapshot was typical of her family dynamic, it was hard to fathom this little girl not feeling resentment towards her baby sister.

The arrival of a new baby is often the most dramatic change in a young child's life, and if this transition isn't handled with sensitivity and empathy, some children will have difficulty regaining their footing. At stake are our child's healthy relationships with parents and siblings, as well as her sense of security and self-worth.

Here are some key points to keep in mind during this challenging adjustment:

1. Have reasonable expectations

A new baby causes a major shift in the family dynamics. No matter how much the older child may have wished for a baby brother or sister, the reality of this shift in the parents' attention and affection is felt as a loss. Children often feel grief, sadness and sometimes anger or guilt, but mostly they are fearful of losing their parents' love. Overwhelmed by this tumultuous blend of emotions, which are nearly impossible for children to understand (much less articulate), they act out their pain through irritating behaviors that are sometimes aggressive. Mood swings can be extreme.

Parents might be shocked to discover an unpleasant side to their child they hadn't known existed, especially if they expected her to be a loving, adoring and helpful big sister during this adjustment. These behaviors are bound to push parents' buttons, yet since the child is experiencing an emotional crisis she needs the assurance of her parents' love and empathy more than ever.

2. Encourage children to express feelings

There are a couple of important ways parents can help children express their feelings in a healthy manner:

a. **When children act-out with the baby** — kissing or patting the baby too hard or jumping on the bed next to her — after calmly but confidently stating the boundary (“I can't let you...”), the parent can ask matter-of-factly, “Are you feeling rough toward the baby right now? Are you upset that the baby's here? Big sisters often feel that way. But I'm going to help you get down from the bed. I'd love for you to sit on my lap or jump on the floor next to me.”

b. **Casually bring up the subject of negative feelings as often as possible:** “Being a big sister is very hard sometimes. It’s normal to get angry at the baby or at mom or dad, feel sad, worry or just be upset and not know why. If you feel any of those things I want to know. I will *always* understand, love you and want to help you.”

It may feel counterintuitive to suggest these feelings to your child (won’t this *encourage* her to feel negatively toward the baby?). The truth is that the more you can openly accept and acknowledge, even *welcome* your child’s negative thoughts and emotions, the more space you will clear for your children to form a genuinely loving bond with their siblings.

3. **But why mention negatives when my child seems fine?**

Some children *do* seem to adapt to life with the new baby peacefully. Why would we project about problems that don’t exist? It is my view that the children who seem more accepting and tolerant of this huge life change need even more encouragement to express negative feelings than those who overtly struggle. No matter how positive any change is there are also elements of fear and loss. *For all of us.* If these feelings aren’t addressed and expressed, they are internalized. You may have a well-behaved child, but chances are good she’s suffering inside.

4. **Avoid guilt-inducing comments**

When parents are expecting baby number two, friends and relatives will often comment to the firstborn child, “Oooh, bet you can’t *wait* to be a big sister!” But by then it’s already begun to dawn on the older child that ‘big sister’ isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. They’ve sensed that the focus of everyone’s attention has shifted away from them. Their future feels uncertain and it will only get worse. They need someone who **understands** their pain and can assure them that their mixed feelings (especially the negative ones) are perfectly valid, or they are likely to turn these feelings inward.

5. **Don’t judge**

Again, this is about adjusting our expectations and understanding that button-pushing behaviors are the manifestation of our child’s pain and confusion. When we label a behavior “not nice”, “mean” or “bad”, children take these judgments personally. It’s not only the behavior that’s bad — *they* are bad. When the people they trust and need most in the world tell them they are “not nice”, they believe it, and this rejection is profound.

6. **Lessen tension by not sweating the small stuff**

Second children are born into a much different environment than their big brothers or sisters. Having an older sibling is exciting. So as much as possible, let it be. Let it be noisier and more chaotic, and let there be more interruptions to the baby’s playtime. Let big sister take toys away from the baby when they’re “playing together” as long as this is physically safe. Understand that this impulse is powerful and symbolic of the rivalry the older child feels. Most babies don’t mind the toys being removed from them unless their parents do. In fact, this is the way they “play” with another child. The less you focus on these harmless behaviors, the less compelling it will be for the older child to repeat them.

7. **Understand your child’s need for trust and autonomy**

Ask for her help whenever possible, especially regarding the baby’s care. When children’s emotions are out of control, opportunities to feel autonomous have a calming effect. But also don’t be disappointed if your child turns you down, because saying “no” is also a way for her to feel autonomous.

8. One-on-one time

Periods of time alone with your children are a necessity, but for both the baby and the older child it's about quality, not quantity. Set aside at least 20 minutes a day in which you are wholly present and focused on your older child (which might mean aiming toward giving the baby an earlier bedtime). Then, when you need to focus on the baby and your child struggles, you can calmly acknowledge, "I see how uncomfortable it is for you when I am feeding the baby. That is really hard for you, I know. I'm so looking forward to our time together tonight after the baby goes to bed. Think about what you'd like to do together."

9. Foster the baby's independent play

A baby who can self-entertain is even more of a blessing the second time around, because his or her independent play creates opportunities for parents to be available to the older child without the baby always between them. Provide a safe, enclosed play space (a crib or playpen is fine for the first months), so that the baby doesn't need constant supervision. Your toddler will probably need this boundary, because the impulse to test the parents by bothering the baby can be strong.

10. Respect your children's continued need for boundaries and calm, helpful parents who are "on their side".

Although extreme exhaustion or guilt might lead us to ease up on boundaries during this period of transition and emotional turmoil, our children need the love and security of our limits now more than ever. They'll need us to give them matter-of-fact reminders like, "I don't want you to touch the baby when you are in a jumpy mood"; choices like, "You can stay next to me quietly while I put the baby to bed, or play in the next room." Sometimes they'll need us to follow through by gently but firmly physically containing them or removing them from situations. Most crucially, they'll need us to intervene way before we lose our temper or think they're "not nice" and with all the confidence, calmness, patience and empathy we can muster.

For more inspiration, please check out my complete guide to respectful discipline:

NO BAD KIDS: Toddler Discipline Without Shame

For more about new babies and sibling rivalry in general, I appreciate these perspectives:

Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (one of my all-time favorite parenting books)

Ask the Parent Coach: 7 Ways to Help Your Child Adjust to a New Baby by Susan Stiffelman

A Call for Sunshine and **Enlightened** by Nadine Hilmar

Sibling Conflicts by Lisa Sunbury

Dealing With Sibling Aggression by Amanda Morgan