



## **Coping with Sibling Rivalry**

We often form the most loving relationships of our lives with our brothers and sisters. Even so, sibling rivalry is an almost inevitable force in most families. As parents, you can do a lot to calm the natural tensions between your children and set the tone for loving, considerate relationships. Some of the following tips may help:

### **Bringing a New Baby into your Home**

- If your child asks why you are having another baby, say something like “We like children”, rather than “We thought you would like a new brother or sister,” since your child may quickly let you know that you were mistaken!
- Preparation for the new arrival through sibling classes, often available at your local hospital, have been shown to help older brothers and sisters adapt to a new arrival.
- Many children may believe that their new brother or sister will come home from the hospital ready to play with them. Prepare them for the new baby’s limitations as a playmate, at least initially, but try to give your older child a role in caring for the new baby.
- Avoid having your older child hear descriptions of mother’s pain during labor and delivery.
- Consider bringing a small gift home from the hospital for your older child *from the new baby*.
- Try to set aside some time on a regular basis for each of you to spend exclusively with your older child, doing something that he or she enjoys and that does not involve the new baby.
- Never force your child to kiss, hold, or even have his picture taken with the new baby if he doesn’t want to. Allow him to adjust to the new baby on his own terms. Speak to him about the new baby’s feelings and point of view.
- Limit aggression promptly, even over-aggressive hugging. Acknowledge your child’s negative as well as positive feelings about the new baby, and then show him the proper way for him to handle the baby.



# Coping with Sibling Rivalry

(continued)

## The Busy Toddler

Your older child may adjust very nicely to the new baby and things will go beautifully until the baby is a toddler and can get into the older child's things! Try some of the following strategies:

- Provide your older child with a lock box, high shelf, or similar safe place for his prized possessions that the younger child can't get to.
- Let your older child play in the playpen (with his own toys), rather than the other way around
- Teach your older child some skills, such as:

How to get out of the way

How to distract their little brother or sister

How to trade – “Here, I'll trade you this neat stuffed animal for that action figure!”

## Dealing with Fights

In general, parents' attempts to break up a fight or settle an argument can backfire, causing the fighting to increase instead. Try the following strategies:

- Never play favorites. Tension between your children will increase if there is any hint of special treatment.
- Ignore minor arguments if possible. For those you can't ignore, walk in, hear both sides briefly, make a statement expressing your confidence in your children's ability to work out a solution, and walk out.
- For serious disputes, handle it the same way but remove the object of the dispute.
- For physical battles, use time out for both children for the length of time appropriate for the younger child, in other words, 1 minute of time out for each year of age. If you choose another punishment (loss of a privilege, for example), make the punishment the same for both children, regardless of who started it, who hit whom, etcetera. This part is very important, and will actually help reduce tensions and potential for future fights.

## Some General Tips

- Praise and correction should be specific for the act or behavior. Example: “You did a good job setting the table”, rather than “You're my good helper.”
- Avoid making comparisons between children, such as, “Why can't you get your homework done on time like Jimmy does?” This just causes resentment and jealousy.



## Coping with Sibling Rivalry

*(continued)*

- Avoid hitting. Use of physical punishment in the home increases aggression between children.
- Consider scheduling a regular family meeting, with the goal in mind of solving problems as they develop. Set some ground rules, such as no blaming or interrupting. We suggest the following strategy:

Agree on a statement of the problem  
Get each person's point of view  
Come up with a list of possible solutions (even silly ones)  
Go over the list together  
Come up with a plan  
Set a time to review the result

Grateful acknowledgement to Barbara Howard, M.D., Assistant Professor, Pediatrics, Johns Hopkins Hospital, Baltimore, MD, for the ideas from her lecture on "Sibling Rivalry", delivered September 26, 1996 at John Hopkins Hospital.



