

Preparing for a Sibling

No crystal ball can tell us how children will respond to a new sibling. Sometimes the children we think will transition smoothly into siblinghood meet the new role with as much grace as an elephant walking in high heels, while those we predict might struggle embrace it as though it were written for them. As such, we can't approach this transition with preconceived ideas, only strategies that best prepare them for the inevitable changes. This article addresses these ideas.

When you find out that you're expecting

Children who have never had to share their world before with a sibling cannot conceive what it means to be a big brother or sister. All they know is that their world is pretty terrific. Someone listens when they talk, someone comes when they call, someone gives their undivided attention when it is possible. Inevitably, everything changes when a sibling comes. For that reason, it may be worth not jumping to the conclusion that children will be as thrilled about the upcoming change as the parents are. Instead, simply telling them the truth and asking what they think might be enough of a conversation starter. Likewise, it could be wise to avoid telling them that they will be the best brother or sister, mainly because if they aren't, that could be quite a high pedestal to fall from. After you break the news, give the child time to process everything. They might say nothing more and ask no further questions. If this scenario is the case, it doesn't necessarily mean they aren't thinking about it again. Instead, they are processing things in their own way and time. If they have more questions, answer them honestly. If they don't, that is ok. There will always be time because it will be inevitable that things will occur that open that door again, for example, a baby shower, doctor appointments, preparing a nursery, an outsider inevitably saying to the child that they must be so excited about the baby coming, etc.

Explaining the realities of having a baby in the house

Few parents I speak to ever forget what the first few months of having a baby in the house feel like. Sleeplessness, nestled alongside what was already a busy routine before the baby came along, usually sits at the top of the list. Preparing children for such disruption is rarely easy, but planting the seeds for this conversation is easier. Bringing out photographs of the child as a baby and pinning them to the fridge, or looking through old albums with the child, can open the door to conversations about the realities of having a baby in the house. As photographs are shared between adult and child, talk to the child about what it was like when they came home—the good and the unexpected. Examples might include, but aren't limited to, something like, "Did you know that when you were a baby, when you were hungry, you would cry so loud that I would almost jump out of bed?" These conversations don't need to be heavy. Instead, share the good, the lovable, the trying, and the memorable moments so they can get a glimpse into life with a new baby.

Preparing children for less explicit one-on-one time

The amount of time children get before a baby arrives will depend on how they like to spend their time. Children who are spectacularly apt at entertaining themselves might not need much one-on-one time, whereas a child whose personality is similar to that of a social butterfly will likely need significantly more. Regardless of where children fall on the spectrum, it will be important that they experience life where immediate attention may not always be possible. Ignoring children is not what is being proposed here, but rather opportunities where they can build their frustration tolerance; for example, if a child asks you to come and see what they are doing, telling them you will be there in one moment and then waiting a few moments will help to build their ability to sit patiently with the feelings that tell them that their life depends upon your immediate and undivided attention. Thanking them for waiting is another plausible strategy—one that helps show them they can wait without enduring any catastrophic or irreversible effects.

Spending time with other children

Mixing with other parents/carers is another way to introduce children to the land of other children's needs. Arranging for children to play games with rules, or even limiting the number of toys available, can be a great way to teach children how to share space and resources. If children experience frustrations, taking the time to show them that you understand that it can be frustrating, but not immediately remedying the problem, can be another way to elevate their ability to withstand challenges that arise when playing with or near other children.

Routines

One of the biggest considerations when a child's life changes is ensuring their routine stays as consistent as possible. Because young children have limited control over their lives, predictability can, at times, be the one thing that helps ground them when everything else feels like it has changed. You may not always be able to predict how much a child's life will change once a baby joins the family; however, if a child has a routine that won't be sustainable once the parent's time is divided, changing it before the baby arrives could prove fruitful. Changing beds, rooms, sleeping arrangements, or times too close to the baby's due date will make it harder for the child and parent (s).

Summing it up

Predicting which children will and won't accept a new baby is almost impossible; however, you can take pre-emptive measures to help. Talking with children and giving them time to absorb the idea of change is one possible strategy. Another option is to let children lead how and when they want to talk about their new sibling. Preparing children as best as possible can help limit any negative feelings they may have about the changes that might occur when a new sibling arrives. Conversations about what it was like when they were little help make such conversations relevant and relatable. Exposing children to situations where babies may be present is another way to help them understand the day-to-day realities of why babies cry and need a parent's attention more quickly. Opportunities to play with other children, where time and toys must be shared, are another way to help prepare them for the life that awaits. Importantly, children need to learn the art of frustration tolerance, not because we want them to manage uncomfortable emotions for its own sake, but because it will help them accept that, at times, a baby's needs might take precedence over their own. Routines are essential to any child. The more consistent their routines are before a new sibling arrives, the more secure they will feel about understanding and predicting what will happen in their lives, even if one or both of their parents' attention is pulled elsewhere.

M.J. Fisher
Child and Family Therapist
B. Soc. Sc.; GradDip Teaching; Dip. Care and Ed.
www.whatmidoes.com
© What MJ Does