

Mother Nurture

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Reducing Sibling Rivalry

If our two-year-old sees me hugging her four-year-old big brother, she'll rush over - saying loudly, "No! My mommy! Go away!" - and try to push him away. He's getting more and more frustrated with her and starting to push back pretty hard. Their squabbles are already probably the biggest single source of stress in my life -- and it's getting worse.

Our siblings are usually the people we know longest in this life, but it's striking how many people have distant, even hostile relations with their brothers and sisters. Family tensions related to sibling rivalries wear on parents individually, and sometimes can challenge their marriage - so it's important to tackle them in steady, systematic ways.

Signs of Deeper Issues

Sibling squabbles are usually a marker, a symptom, of underlying issues, such as:

- Depleted, stressed-out parents
- Disengaged fathers
- Too much child care
- Over-busy, chaotic homes
- Not enough time and nurturance given to children
- Not enough parental authority
- Unmanaged temperamental or health problems

Ask yourself if any of these could be a factor in the sibling issues in your family. If so, make a serious plan with your partner to address it - and consider the practical suggestions in the rest of this column.

In a family, just like in any other situation, if we keep working at something - and stick with it - it usually gets better.

Before the Second (or Third, etc.) Baby Comes

- Fill up the "bank" of personal and marital well-being before things really hit the fan: eat well, get lots of sleep, don't start a remodel (or new business!), be extra loving and patient with each other, and so on.
- Get the older child settled in any new, practical arrangements that you've been planning well before your due date, like weaning, moving out of the family bed, adding a couple days at preschool, etc. (But we must add that it's often helpful to continue co-

sleeping with both the older child and the toddler in the parent's bedroom as a way to ease the transition to Baby Makes Four [or Five . . .]).

- Build up the father's relationship with the older child - since dad is going to need to fill the vacuum left by mom's shift of attention and care to the helpless infant.
- Try to give the older child some experience with infants. In age-appropriate ways, do what you can to explain how his or her life will change when the baby arrives.
- Set up in advance lots of great support for mom, dad, and marriage when the new child arrives: a doula, some housecleaning, help from relatives, a little extra in the bank, etc.

Especially During the First Year - But Also Thereafter

- Really keep an eye on replenishing yourself. There's no way to avoid getting worn out, but you don't have to hit bottom. Protein with every meal, sacrifice housework for sleep, get out of the house, reach out to other parents, take your vitamins, make yourself get exercise -- all the common-sense things you can do if you set your mind to it.
- Cut the older child as much slack as you can (and without creating an enduring behavior problem). Remember that she has been supplanted, and that she sees her rival every day occupying the throne she once held.
- Make sure dad and others give the older child a lot of time and love.
- Daily if possible, arrange for some time when the father or others takes care of the infant so that the mother can spend good, one-to-one time with the older child.
- Minimize the occasions when the younger one wrecks the moment of the older one - as in the example at the top of this column.
- To the older child, keep pointing out instances when the younger one was interested in him, and really looked up to him

In General

- Try to create routine situations in which the two children enjoy each other's company, like doing fun things together with a parent.
- Beware "tilting" toward one child or another, such as over-protecting the younger child and being too demanding of the older one.
- Parents have got to be willing to be the justice system in the family -- otherwise, it's the law of the jungle: most of the time, kids do not actually work it out among themselves: it's that whoever can hit the hardest or yell the loudest or work the grown-ups most skillfully is the one who prevails.
- Parents create justice in the home through standing for certain values, having clear "house rules," and using a skillful combination of rewards and penalties. For example, think about how the kids have mistreated each other over the past few days, and turn those incidents into rules that would stop them from happening in the future.

Of course, usually you have to back up the rules with consequences, but that's just Parenting 101, and already familiar to us all. The key is naming the rule (e.g., No Hitting.

No Grabbing Stuff. No Interrupting. No Put-Downs.) and then getting serious about enforcing it just about every single time.

- Have an attitude of "*I AM THE BOSS. I AM IN CHARGE. I WILL NOT BE DEFEATED. I WILL PREVAIL!*" That confidence will help sustain your efforts, plus your kids will sense it and be more willing to cooperate.

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