

Helping a Toddler Adjust to New Baby



A two year old is still a baby, and it is natural for a two year old to get jealous of a new baby. In fact, I doubt there is a two year old in the world who has not been jealous when a new sibling arrives. Your goal is to help your two year old manage that jealousy so love has a chance to grow, and to win out. Anything you can do while you're pregnant to prepare your two year old will be helpful. Your goal is to get her excited about the baby, and feeling connected to it, even before it is born.

During the birth, you'll want to make sure your two year old doesn't feel abandoned. Having mom vanish to the hospital is often traumatic for little ones, and makes it more difficult for them to welcome the new baby when mom finally shows up with him.

Finally, the million dollar question: What do you do to minimize sibling rivalry once the baby is born?

1. Have dad carry the baby in the door and introduce him to the five year old. You go straight to your two year old, scoop him or her up into your arms, and do a lot of adoring hugging and kissing.

2. Make your child the hero in the eyes of the baby (and in her own eyes.) When you get a moment alone with your two youngest, call your two year old over to snuggle with you and the baby. (Make sure your five year old is occupied elsewhere, you should do this with her separately.) Tell the baby that you want to introduce Big Sister/Brother, who is a wonderful boy/girl that you hope Baby will aspire to be like. List all the wonderful things you love about your two year old, that Baby will get to know.

3. Better living through bonding: Then let Big Sibling sit and hold the baby, helping her to support baby's head. Bonding experts say that babies' heads give off pheromones, and when we inhale them, we fall in love, and begin to feel protective. The more your older child snuggles the new sib, the better their relationship is likely to be.

4. Make sure both of your kids know they still have an important role in the family. Reinforce all the wonderful things about who they are and how they contribute to the family. "Jess, I love the way you help me," or "Sara, I love the way you make me laugh," which note specific contributions, help your child develop a sense of why she's still a valuable member of the family. Talk often about the fact that each member of the family is important in their own way and makes their own special contribution. The family needs each person for it to be whole.

5. Naturally your two year old will be testing you to be sure you still love her. Keep your relationship with her as smooth and affectionate as possible, sidestepping power struggles and minimizing conflicts. But keep your usual limits, which will help her feel secure. (By limits, I don't mean punishment, which always backfires. Set limits, like bedtime or no hitting, and enforce them with empathy.)

6. This is not the time, obviously, for asking your two year old to be a big girl. Delay potty training, making her give up her bottle or pacifier, etc. If she wakes up more often for your reassurance at night, and you can't go to her because of the baby, make sure Dad comforts her and parents her back to

sleep. Expect regression. Let her be a baby as much as she wants to be. Give her lots of extra love and attention.

7. Keep your kids' routines the same as they were before the baby as much as possible. This will provide a buffer against the stress of so much change and insecurity.

8. Obviously, never leave the two year old unsupervised with the baby. A two year old cannot be expected to control those jealous emotions and the stakes are just too high to take a chance. Supervise closely. Try to avoid admonishing your two year old. If you notice her getting rough, quickly move the baby away from her, and distract the two year old with a question, song or story.

9. Don't make everything about the baby. Keep your cooing for private times. Instead of saying you're waiting for the baby to wake up before you can go out to play, say you're waiting for the laundry to finish, or the casserole to bake, or for a phone call. Instead of "When I'm done with the baby I'll help you," say "I'll be there as soon as my hands are free."

10. Read (with your child) every book you can find on siblings with new babies. Use these as a springboard to make observations about your child's feelings. Your goal is to give your child words for her feelings, because that helps her manage them rather than having to act them out. Be direct: "I know it's hard to have me busy with the baby when you want me." Commiserate: "Babies sure take a lot of time, don't they!"

11. Spend as much positive alone-time as possible every single day with both of your older kids. When there's another adult around, let them hold the baby while you snuggle with your toddler and/or preschooler. When you sit down to feed the baby, invite your older kids over for a read-a-thon. They will look forward to those times.

By the way, any older children will have plenty of feelings of her own about the new baby. It's good to give her some babying too!

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