

Sibling Rivalry

It is natural and normal for an older child to respond to the birth of a new baby with feelings of jealousy, resentment, insecurity, anger and sadness.

What is sometimes hard for parents to see or understand is the way in which these feelings make themselves known:

- One child may quite clearly try to physically hurt their baby brother, or say openly that they want him to go back.
- Another child may be loving towards the new baby, but aggressive and hostile to her mother.
- One might become very withdrawn, sucking his thumb and bedwetting.
- Another may be fine at home but a cause for concern at school. Individual children have different difficulties with their new sibling:
- A child may accept the new baby with no apparent jealousy, but when the baby is nine months old and grabs their toys, enormous feelings of resentment can surface.
- Problems may arise when a younger child becomes sociable, makes their own friends and no longer needs their older sister or brother so much.
- One child may seem to be more popular or successful at school than the other.

Brothers and sisters may be very close during some periods, but there may be times throughout their lives when jealous feelings are very difficult for them.

What can parents do?

Your older child's unattractive and unlovable behaviour is directly related to their fear of being utterly unlovable. They need extra reassurance and love at this point, along with clear guidelines about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. Often the response to the bad behaviour confirms their absolutely worst feelings about themselves - that they have been replaced by a new baby because they are completely unlovable.

The message to try and get across to your child is that they are not 'bad' for feeling like this, that you understand how difficult they are finding it and how rotten these feelings make them feel inside.

However demanding and tiring this period is, remind yourself that you are the parent and it is within your power to try to break this cycle. Take some consolation from the fact that your child trusts your love enough to test you to the limit, and to show you how bad they are feeling. Although it may often be hard for you to manage both your older child and the new baby, your continuing love allows your child a safe place to express their feelings.

If you feel you need help, contact your GP or health visitor.

- Try and avoid too many other life changes occurring at the same time as the new arrival. Moving house or starting at playgroup, for example, are best delayed if at all possible.
- Take time to encourage and appreciate any helpful and loving gestures made towards the new baby, while ignoring negative and babyish behaviour as far as possible.
- Find small, manageable tasks for your older child to do to encourage them to be involved. Don't push it if you get a negative response, but give praise for the help you do receive.
- Try to arrange some special, baby-free time for you and your older child to have a quiet read or play on your own.
- Be firm about negative behaviour without making your child feel guilty. Stress that it is what they are doing, not what they are, that is unacceptable.
- Beware of getting into the habit of thinking about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, and 'good' and 'bad' children within a family. Family myths can be hard to break.
- Watch out for signs of withdrawal or depression in your older child, and mention any concerns to school or playgroup staff. A child who is finding their intense feelings about a new baby too difficult to share may bury them and need help in talking about them to someone outside the family.