

Positive Parenting

Preparing Your Child for a New Baby

A new baby means some major changes for the entire family. Children can be excited about getting a baby brother or sister and they can be loving and caring toward a new baby. They may rush to tell a parent any time the baby cries, and cheerfully watch and help with nappy changes and other tasks. At other times, children can be jealous and aggressive toward the baby. Preparing your child for a new brother or sister will help get their relationship off to a good start. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you understand your child's feelings and prepare them for the arrival of a new baby.

How To Prepare Your Child for a New Baby

Tell Your Child in Advance

Children need to be prepared for major changes in their lives. At first, talk to your child about families with brothers and sisters so your child sees that many families have more than one child. Tell your child about the new baby three or four months before the baby is due. You may like to tell school-age children from the start of the pregnancy. Tell your child you are having a new baby because you are a growing family. Do not tell your child you are having a baby to give them a friend. Your child may be disappointed with a new baby who sleeps a lot of the time and does not play with them.

Talk with Your Child About Babies

Let your child know what to expect. Explain that babies sleep a lot of the time, cry some of the time, and cannot play or move around. Show your child photographs of when they were a baby. Your child may like to hear stories about when they were born. You may be able to spend time with a friend's baby so your child can see what a baby is like. You can even read stories about the arrival of a new baby. Look at pictures of babies and talk to your child about *our baby*.

Older children may ask questions about where babies come from. This is a good time to talk to your child and read books about sexuality and childbirth. Be prepared to answer lots of questions.



Involve Your Child in the Preparations

Let your child feel the baby kicking. Encourage your child to help get the baby's room ready. You may like to make a present for the baby together. You may also like to arrange a present for the baby to give to your older child.

Make Changes to Your Child's Routine in Advance

Well before the baby arrives, make any necessary changes to your child's usual routine. This will give your child time to adjust. It may be necessary to move your child from a cot to a bed, or into another bedroom. Do not say these changes are because of the baby or your older child may become angry or jealous, or feel that the baby is pushing them out. Instead of saying things like the cot is needed for the new baby, say something like—*You're a big girl now, so it's time for you to sleep in a big girl's bed.* Avoid making any major changes to your child's routine in the month before the baby is born.

Arrange Child Care

Tell your child ahead of time where you will be going when the baby is born and who will be looking after them. Let your child know that you may have to go during the night. It is a good idea to wake them to say goodbye. If you do have to leave while your child is asleep or at

day care, preschool or school, leave a note that can be read to them. Explain to your child that the baby is ready to be born, where you are going, you love them and will see them soon.

What To Do When the Baby Arrives

Let Your Child Visit

Have someone bring your child to visit you and the new baby. Visiting you and the baby will decrease any distress your child feels at being away from you. It may also reduce some of their worries about your welfare. Before the visit, make sure your child knows how long the visit will be and what they will be able to do when they see you and the baby. Explain where they will be going after the visit and who will look after them.

You may like to have a photograph of your child nearby so they can see you are thinking of them. You could also have a little birthday party so your child can celebrate the arrival of their new brother or sister. Sometimes children can be quiet, distant or upset when they visit. They may not want to cuddle you. Be prepared for this and accept your child's reaction. They will mix with you and the baby when they are ready.

If you are staying away from your child for a few days, keep in touch by telephoning and writing notes that can be read to them. Suggest your child make a card or do some drawings for you and the baby.

When you are first reunited with your child at home, be available to hug and kiss your child and give them your full attention. Do not worry if your child does not seem interested or is unwilling to hug you at first.

Maintain Your Child's Routine

When the baby arrives, maintain your child's usual routine as much as possible, such as mealtimes, bedtimes, and daily activities such as day care, preschool or school.

Involve Your Child

It is important that your older child does not feel excluded. Ask your child if they would like to help with getting nappies or checking on the baby. Praise your child when they behave well—*Thank you for helping me change Dean's nappy. You're a good helper.* If your older child does not want to help, do not force them.

Talk to your child about the baby. Show your child how to hold and touch the baby. Use the baby's name rather than saying *the baby*. This will help your child to think of the baby as a person rather than a thing that has been brought

home. When relatives and friends visit the new baby, encourage them to give some attention to your older child.

Make Your Child Feel Important

To make your older child feel important, spend quality time with them each day. Try to spend small amounts of time together—as little as one or two minutes—frequently throughout the day. You may even like to take your child out to dinner or on a special outing from time to time. Throughout the day, praise your child for behaving well, such as when they play quietly while the baby is sleeping. Show affection and tell your child you love them.

Encourage Your Child To Be Gentle

Set a good example. Show affection for your baby and your child. Let your child hold and cuddle the baby. Praise your child for being gentle with the baby. Talk to your child about the baby's reactions to them—*See how the baby is smiling at you Grace? She likes the way you touch her so gently.* This will help your child's relationship with the baby and show them that they can enjoy the baby.

Plan Ahead for the Baby's Feed Times

Feed time for your baby can be stressful because it is hard to respond immediately to your older child's behaviour. Make sure your older child is in a safe place and has plenty of interesting things to do before you start feeding your baby. This can help prevent problems. You may like to have some special toys that your child can only play with when you are feeding the baby. This gives your older child something to look forward to at feed times when they are likely to get less attention from you. You may also like to have a drink and snack ready for them. When your older child behaves well, praise them.

Some children like to watch the baby being fed and be close to their parent. If possible, try to cuddle your older child with one arm while holding the baby in the other. You may like to read, sing or talk to your child, or watch them play nearby. Some children like to copy their parents and pretend they are feeding their own baby, such as a doll or teddy bear.

What Problems Can Occur?

Children can react in many ways to the arrival of a new baby. Common problems include:

- Disobedience or misbehaviour.
- Temper tantrums.
- Moodiness.
- Roughness with the baby, such as hugging too tightly, hitting, pinching or biting.
- Separation problems and clinginess.

- Problems with toileting.
- Bedtime problems.
- Mealtime problems.
- Babyish behaviour, such as wanting a bottle or to be spoon-fed.

Why Do Problems Occur?

Children need to adjust to having a baby in the house and some problem reactions may occur. It is common for children to feel some resentment toward a new baby. A child's relationship with their parents changes a lot with the arrival of a brother or sister. It can be difficult for children to get used to sharing their parents' attention and they may resent all the interest shown in the baby.

Problems are more likely to occur if children feel they are being left out. They may think their parents do not love them because they now get less attention. Some babyish behaviours, such as thumb sucking or wanting to wear a nappy or be spoon-fed, may be a message from the child that they also need attention. However, giving children extra attention at these times can actually encourage the babyish behaviour to continue.

If children do not get attention when they behave well, they may learn to get attention by misbehaving. Extra attention such as coaxing, threatening or reasoning can be an accidental reward for misbehaviour.

When parents are tired, they may overlook problem behaviour. If this is the case, children can learn that they get what they want when they misbehave. If misbehaviour works, it is likely to continue.

Following the arrival of a baby, an older child may be asked or left to do more such as dressing themselves or tidying up. Problems are likely to occur when children are expected to do things that are too hard.

How To Manage Problem Behaviour

Be Prepared for Your Child's Reactions

If your child slips back in an achievement like being toilet trained or staying quietly in their bed all night, do not punish them. Instead, give your child lots of praise and attention when they are behaving well. Look for more opportunities to spend quality time together.

Acknowledge Your Child's Feelings

If your child says they do not like the baby, let them know you understand how they are feeling. Do not tell your child they are bad to feel that way about the baby. It is good for your child to talk about how they feel, but do

not dwell on negative feelings. If your child says they do not like the baby, agree that it is not always fun to have a baby in the house. Talk about how you love the baby but also find some things hard, like getting up in the middle of the night. Read stories about children who have mixed feelings about a new baby to let them know that it is alright to feel this way. Do not try to make your child feel guilty about their negative feelings for the baby.

Be Consistent

Use your usual approach to discipline. Use the same rules and consequences you used before the baby was born. Act immediately when misbehaviour occurs. Do not argue, nag or debate the point with your child. Simply carry out the consequence you usually use. This will help your child feel secure and they will know what to expect.

Ignore Minor Problems

Ignore babyish behaviours such as using a baby voice or saying they cannot feed themselves. Do not look at or speak to your child while they act in babyish ways. You may need to turn away or walk away until the babyish behaviour stops. Praise your child as soon as they are behaving well again—*You're doing a good job feeding yourself, Connor.*

Act Quickly if Serious Misbehaviour Occurs

Always act quickly if serious misbehaviour, such as hurting the baby, occurs. Let your child know that hurting the baby is not acceptable. For more information on managing misbehaviour, see the booklet *Positive Parenting* and other tip sheets in this series such as *Hurting Others*, *Disobedience I and II*, and *Fighting and Aggression*.

Points To Remember

Children can feel some resentment or jealousy toward a new baby. This resentment can worsen when the infant starts to move around and touch the older child's toys and games. Explain to your child that babies do not understand about sharing. Encourage your child to think that the baby is trying to copy them. It can be helpful to teach your older child how to distract your infant's attention with toys of their own. Praise your older child when they do this—*That was a good idea giving Hayley some blocks while you play with the train set. Well done!* It is important that your older child is also given some uninterrupted time and space for play, away from the baby, each day.

Key Steps

- Prepare your child in advance for the new baby.
- Talk to your child about babies and what to expect.
- Make necessary changes to your child's routine well before the baby is born.
- Be prepared for a mixed reaction when your child first meets the baby.
- Involve your child in caring for the baby.
- Spend some quality time with your child each day.
- Praise your child for being gentle with the baby.
- Plan ahead to prevent problems at feed times.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings.
- Be prepared for some babyish behaviour from your older child.
- Use planned ignoring for minor problem behaviour.
- Use your usual approach to discipline if serious misbehaviour occurs.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions, or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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Published by the Victorian Parenting Centre 2005.
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Code: PPT5004