



by Karen Stephens

Sibling Envy: Adjusting to the New Baby

Well-prepared kids are excited about a new sibling's arrival. Months ahead of time they puff out chests boasting that soon they'll be a big brother or sister. The thrill continues after the baby comes home from the hospital, when kids are eager-beaver "mamma's little helpers." Everything is novel and fascinating; even baby's cries are greeted with awe. But, eventually, the honeymoon sparkle dims. Kids realize the new baby is here to stay. It's not dropping in for a visit; it's not merely an entertaining toy. It dawns on siblings that baby is a permanent fixture on the family landscape. To make matters worse, parents are absolutely gaga over the new baby. They oohh and aahh over every little thing; everything's a "Kodak moment" for the new kid on the block. The word "forever" takes on a whole new meaning . . .

The best term for these feelings is "sibling envy." True rivalry hasn't set in, but all the attention the baby gets is logical cause for envy. Sharing the spotlight and parents' love is a good lesson for kids, but it's not an easy or smooth one. Expect kids to be honest about the intrusion. Through words and behavior, they'll reveal their displeasure at being dethroned by a new child who has the audacity to be as cute and cuddly as they used to be.

At first, the baby is "our baby." Later you'll hear, "Can't you make that baby stop squawking?" "When are you taking that baby back to the hospital?" (Implied tagline: "Where it belongs!") Kids visibly droop when you say, "But sweetie, the baby is home to stay, he's part of our family. We'd never dream of giving him away. We'd miss him too much, wouldn't we?" (Ask a loaded question, expect a loaded answer!)

It's human nature to like being mom and dad's one and only. But, thankfully, the sibling envy stage can be cut short. Here are some ways to show siblings they are every bit as important as the new baby — and just as loved.

1. Don't make siblings constantly share your time and attention; it invites envy and jealousy. Regularly carve out times to spend undistracted one-on-one time with each child. Some parents use story time for this. Others allow for extra cuddles at nap or television time.
2. Focus on the positives of "our" new baby. But if children complain, listen without chastising. If they say they miss how things used to be, admit that sometimes you do, too. Don't put guilt trips on kids by saying, "Well, how ungrateful, I give you a new brother and all you do is complain."
3. Teach children how to help with the baby and around the house, but don't overdo it. If baby becomes a job, siblings perceive the baby as a burden to be endured rather than a new addition to love and enjoy.
4. When children regularly help out, give them a new privilege to reward their "big kid" behavior. This may be letting them answer the phone or holding the dog's leash on walks.
5. Consistently point out ways the baby reveals attachment to and affection for siblings: "Look how Charlie smiles when you walk into the room!" Videotape or photograph siblings making infants laugh with their funny faces. Compliment children when they protect babies from danger or divert their attention to safer toys. (Likewise, be assertive if a child hurts or threatens a new baby. Firmly tell her you won't allow it, and then redirect her behavior.)
6. When the baby comes home, buy young kids a baby doll so they can pretend to feed, bathe, or soothe "their baby" while you care for their new sibling.

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7. For older preschoolers, create safe zones where they can play without fear of the baby destroying their toys or belongings. Do it now; don't wait until the baby is crawling or toddling with a tipsy stagger.
8. Be respectful of kids' possessions and territory. Ask permission before giving the baby a sibling's special item, like an old stuffed toy. If baby is to inherit a sibling's crib, move the sibling to their "big bed" before the baby arrives. Don't kick them out of their own crib the minute the baby comes home. That's adding insult to injury!
9. Find ways to spread your attention by doing two things at once. During feedings, ask siblings to snuggle near as they read YOU a book or narrate a family photo album.
10. Avoid using the new baby as the excuse for things the kids or family CAN'T do. You'll breed resentment if kids think they can't play or go places because the baby is always needing care and attention.
11. It's not uncommon for children to wish things were "like they used to be . . . just you and me." Younger children reveal these feelings through pretend or doll play. Listen and respond to pretend behavior without judging. Don't chastise or name call. Be prepared for flights of fantasy like, "Let's pretend the baby finds a new family." Simply say you understand it's hard to get used to sharing mom and dad with another person.
12. Children are smart. They see infants getting oodles of attention so they try acting like a baby, too. When dealing with regression, be direct. If a walker reverts to crawling, tell them you're proud they can walk. Comment on how nice it is all your kids don't have to crawl. If children whine or baby-talk, firmly say you'll listen when they use their regular "three-year-old" voice. Children who backslide in toilet training will need more reminders to potty. When sibling envy becomes manageable, regressive behaviors, like thumb sucking or dragging around a favorite blanket will diminish. It requires time and patience.
13. Be available for spontaneous heart to heart talks. Give kids the chance to say they feel left out, and then reassure them of your unending love. Your listening ear and shoulder to lean on will promote their sense of security. At discussion's end, tell children you're confident they can cope with the baby and that they'll be a wonderful sibling. In your child's eyes, your trust and faith mean everything.

Parenting Books on Helping Siblings Adjust

- *From One Child to Two: What to expect, how to cope, and how to enjoy your growing family* by Judy Dunn (New York: Fawcett Book Group, 1995).
- *Loving Each One Best: A caring and practical approach to raising siblings* by Nancy Samalin with Catherine Whitney (New York: Bantam Books, 1995).

Children's Books on Adjusting to New Siblings

- *I Love My Baby Sister (Most of the time)* by Elaine Edelman (New York: HarperCollins, 1984).
- *Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998)
- *Julius: The Baby of the World* by Kevin Henkes (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1995).
- *What Baby Wants* by Phyllis Root (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 2001).
- *Daddy's New Baby* by Judith Vigna (Chicago: Albert Whitman, 1982).
- *My New Baby and Me: A First Year Record Book for Big Brothers & Sisters* by Diane G. Smith (New York: Simon & Schusters Children's Books, 1986).
- *Big Like Me* by Anna Grossnickle Hines (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1991).
- *The Trouble with Babies* by Angie and Chris Sage (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).
- *The Baby Sister* by Tomie dePaola (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).
- *We Have a Baby* by Cathryn Falwell (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1999).
- *Little Monster Did It* by Helen Cooper (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).
- *Angelina's Baby Sister* by Katharine Holabird (Middleton, WI: Pleasant Co. Publications, 2000).
- *When the Teddy Bears Came* by Martin Waddell (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1998).
- *On Mother's Lap* by Ann Herbert Scott (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1992).
- *Something Special* by Nicola Moon (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 1997).
- *My Baby Brother: What A Miracle!* by Sylvia Rouss (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 2002).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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