



by Karen Stephens

## The New Baby: Prepare Kids for Siblings

Each night two-year-old Nina Elizabeth kisses her mama goodnight. Then she kisses her brother — still in mother's very prominent mid-section. Little brother will “come out to play” just in time for trick-or-treating. The family is ready; now it's time to wait to be the “big sis”; big changes are coming!

A first born has a very different family experience than subsequent siblings. With each new child, the family re-invents itself. It has no choice; birth adds a factor to the family equation that can't be ignored. Another personality equipped with a multitude of idiosyncrasies demands family members to adjust and bend and blend — or else.

If you walk a mile in an older sibling's shoes you'll understand why new family members, especially cute and cuddly ones, aren't always greeted with open arms. Sharing parents' love and time takes some getting used to. An adjustment period occurs as kids jockey into family positions. Parents get an unexpected rude awakening when adjustment includes sibling hostility; especially if they never had siblings when growing up.

When baby makes four, firstborns feel displaced — even abandoned. They think the new kid will steal their parents' undivided love and attention. They worry their turf will be invaded, their toys confiscated, their private room intruded. Some kids even wonder why they alone weren't enough for their parents. That's a heavy load of emotional baggage to carry, especially on preschool shoulders.

Okay, so it's hard for kids to adjust to a sibling. Does that mean families should have only one child? No way! I favor siblings. (As a second born, I'm biased.) Professionally, I also value siblings. They foster character and social skills in brothers and sisters. But facing the reality of siblings can be a tough row to hoe, especially for firstborns. However brief, they alone had the unique experience of having parents all to themselves. It's a luxury some kids don't give up graciously. Can you blame them?

Sensitive, responsive parents can smooth the path to strong sibling bonds. You can't remove all the bumps, nor should you. Challenge nurtures growth. But parents can minimize predictable — and I think logical — sibling envy. Through the process, a valuable lesson in love can be learned by all.

Here are suggestions for preparing number one love bug for the arrival of number two. Good luck!

1. Tell your child about your pregnancy and the new baby yourself. Don't let it be a surprise from another person. Sibling additions are a family affair, kids shouldn't feel left out.
2. Time is hard for children to comprehend, days can seem excruciatingly like months. Wait until you're three to five months along before popping the news. (This also gets you past the months with the highest chance of miscarriage.) Talk about birth date in terms of holidays, special events, or seasons. For instance, rather than saying the birth will be late October, tell a young child, “When you wear a sweater outside and the leaves are red and yellow, the baby will be born.” That response is more understandable to a child's concept of time and sequence of events.

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3. Clue in child care staff or teachers on the expected arrival date. They can objectively support your child. They can also watch for behavior that indicates how well a child understands (or is concerned about) the upcoming birth. Caregiver teamwork helps kids!
4. Answer your child's questions simply, correctly, and honestly, according to his or her ability to understand. "How did the baby get inside you?" "A part of mom and dad made the baby begin to grow inside mom's womb (or uterus.)" Kids might ask if the baby eats, hears, or can talk in the womb. (Answers: "Yes." "Yes." And, "No.") "Why is the baby waiting soooo long to come out?" "The baby must grow bigger before he can live outside of me." Expect anything; every child comes up with a dandy. Be prepared to answer the same questions more than once; it takes time for complex concepts to be grasped.
5. Some kids think babies arrive ready to play all day. Prepare kids for a newborn's true abilities. Visit friends who have babies or baby-sit them so kids understand how much newborns sleep and cry. If you breast-feed, let kids see how that takes place, too.
6. During baby visits, coach siblings in baby-speak. Help them read infants' non-verbal communication or cues to hasten bonds. Point out how infants use different sounds, facial expressions, and varying cries to get what they need. Explain when babies turn away or stiffen their bodies, they want us to stop talking or playing with them.
7. Let your child go on some prenatal doctor visits with you. (Or if applicable, let them be present during midwife visits.) Visit the hospital beforehand. Hospitals have sibling classes to prepare kids for birth and mom's absence.
8. Reassure kids you love them forever; they'll never be replaced. Spend lots of time together. Cuddle up; look at kids' baby pictures to show how you fed, bathed, and cared for them. Tell them you'll do the same for the new baby, and they can help, too.
9. Let your child see ultra-sounds or listen to the baby's heartbeat. Baby kicks and moves should be a frequently shared family experiences, too!
10. While waiting for baby, and during delivery, a predictable routine will provide stability and security. Keep stress and major life changes to a minimum. If possible (a big if!), birthing should not be paired with toilet training, a move, planned hospitalization, large family visits, change in schools or child care, vacations, separation. or divorce.
11. Ask your child to help prepare the home for the sibling. Solicit their suggestions for infant room decoration. Let them pick out a baby blanket or toys. Tell them how much the baby will appreciate siblings for making their new home pretty and welcoming.
12. The separation from parents during delivery can be scary and confusing, especially if the trip to the hospital involves emergency. Beforehand, explain that mom will be gone for a few days so a doctor can help bring the baby into the world, safe and healthy. Have children cared for by someone with whom they feel comfortable and secure. This isn't the time to try out a new babysitter! Close friends and family work best. Let kids know whom to expect. Include children in making a list of household routines they want the sitter to know about. This might include favorite menus or listing television programs children especially want (or are allowed) to watch.
13. Let siblings help pack mom's hospital bag. Ask them to include one of their photos so mom can see their smile every day. Let them pack a drawing for the hospital room.
14. Take time to practice what will happen when mom's body decides its time for the baby to be born. Knowing what to expect goes far in allaying kids' fears and concerns.
15. Talking to you at the hospital will be new to siblings. To help them get used to your telephone voice, practice talking on the phone with each other. That way they won't think your slightly altered voice means you are hurt or sick . . . (Just plum tired!)
16. To ease separation during delivery, leave a note at home written just to the kids. Tape record mom reading a good morning or good night book. Hide little surprises around the house; from the hospital give kids clues on where to find them. Expense isn't the point, thoughtfulness is. Reassure kids that out-of-sight is not out-of-mind.
17. Let kids know they can visit you at the hospital after the baby is born. Remember, their attachment is to mom, not yet to the new baby. Mom should have free arms and time to give siblings undivided attention. Talk about them, not just the new baby.
18. Babies are hard for anyone to tell apart. To help siblings pick out their new baby in the nursery, ask a nurse to put a family photo in the baby's bassinet.
19. Prepare for first meetings. Many parents videotape or tape record first encounters of the sibling kind! Some parents give children a hello gift from the newborn to smooth over wariness. Such rituals form traditions and pave the way to attachment.
20. Teach your child to safely hold the baby, including head support. Take a photo of the kids together. Make copies for child care cubbies or lockers at school. Help kids make a treat for friends or classmates to celebrate a sibling's birth.
21. Once the baby makes it home, take time for a family group hug. After all, a new baby doesn't make an appearance very often. (Did I hear "Thank goodness!" out there?)

### Parenting Books

- *Welcoming Your Second Baby* by Vicki Lansky (Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers, 1990).
- *Why Do We Need Another Baby?: Helping your child welcome a new arrival* by Cynthia MacGregor (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1996).

### Children's Books on New Siblings

- *A New Baby at KoKo Bear's House* by Vicki Lansky (Minnetonka, MN: Book Peddlers, 1991).
- *The New Baby at Your House* by Joanna Cole (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1999).
- *I'm a Big Brother* by Joanna Cole (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1997).
- *I'm a Big Sister* by Joanna Cole (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1997).
- *The New Baby* by Fred Rogers (New York: Putnam, 1985).
- *The New Baby* by Anne Cavardi & Stephen Cartwright (Tulsa, OK: Usborne Books, 2001).
- *The Baby Sister* by Tomie dePaola (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).
- *Oonga Boonga* by Frieda Wishinsky (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2001).
- *Hello Baby!* by Lizzy Rockwell (New York: Random House for Young Readers, 2000).
- *When I Am A Sister* by Robin Ballard (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1998).
- *Waiting for Jennifer* by Kathryn Osebold Galbraith (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).
- *Ben's Baby* by Michael Foreman (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).
- *Waiting for Hannah* by Marisabina Russo (New York: Greenwillow, 1989).
- *Happy Birth Day!* by Robie H. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1996).
- *A Baby Sister for Frances* by Russel Hoban (New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1976).
- *Waiting for Baby* by Harriet Ziefert (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998).
- *She Come Bringing Me That Little Girl Baby* by Eloise Greenfield (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
- *When the New Baby Comes, I'm Moving Out* by Martha Alexander (New York: Dial Books for Young Readers, 1979).
- *The Baby* by John Burningham (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1994).
- *My Baby Brother* by Harriet Hains (London: DK Publishing, 1992).
- *Will There Be a Lap for Me?* by Dorothy Corey (Chicago: Albert Whitman, 1995).
- *Oh, Baby* by Sara Stein (New York: Walker & Co., 1993).

**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*.