

Becoming A Big Brother/Sister

Preparing for a New Baby

Tips to help prepare siblings for life with a new baby and minimize or prevent sibling rivalry:

- Allow your child to help with preparations for the new baby, including decorating the nursery or helping to pick out clothing. Toys and other newborn supplies.
- Try not to make too many changes in your child's routine close to the delivery. Things like moving from a crib to a big bed, moving bedrooms, or changing daycare would be better well before the new baby is born. Also, don't try to teach your child new skills, such as potty training, close to the due date, and expect some regression of already mastered skills.
- Spend special time with your other child and remind visitors to pay attention to the sibling and not just to the new baby. Include sibling in pictures and other activities.
- Making T-Shirts that say, "I am the big sister" or "Anna's Baby Brother" can be both a fun thing for the kids to do as well as a great way to help maintain the focus on the positive aspects of having a new baby.
- Ask for your child's help and involve your child in baby's care. Even very young children can help by getting a diaper for you, picking out clothes, or patting baby's back to elicit burps.
- During feeding time, ask if your child would like to have snack/lunch while baby is eating. Feeding is also a great time for a quiet activity with your child, such a reading a story or playing a game.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings. Explain that visitors tend to make a fuss over a new baby, but that doesn't mean they don't think your child isn't special too. If visitors are fawning over the newborn, scoop up your older child for some cuddling.
- If your child expresses negative emotions toward the baby, consider it a good thing – he's getting it off his chest, not storing resentment. Allow him to express himself, and tell him you understand how he feels. Explain that it's okay to feel less than jolly about the new baby sometimes.
- Be generous with praise. Don't ever miss an opportunity to praise your child. Reward efforts to be helpful, and acknowledge any positive things she says about the baby.
- Instead of sending out birth announcements from the parents, maybe the older sibling can be involved in choosing and sending out the birth announcement. An announcement that says, "Introducing Christopher's New Baby Sister" can nurture the older child's pride at being a big brother and help keep him as part of the focus of the family's excitement over the new baby.
- Perhaps the most important thing parents who are adding to their family need is support. Consider a postpartum doula. Since most people will not need a lot of new baby clothes, toys or equipment for a new baby, let friends and family know that the gift that would be most appreciated is a contribution toward the postpartum doula of your choice.
- Try to let go of guilt. There is no way to give both children equal attention and do the same things for the new baby as were done with the first baby. Nor will the older child receive the same level of attention that she did before the new baby came along. Rather than focus on what their kids are not getting, it's important for parents to do their best to give their kids what they can.
- Remember that one of your gifts to all of your children is the sibling relationships they will have with one another.

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Preparing Siblings for Birth

There are many things you can do to prepare your children for both pregnancy and for the birth itself:

- Share children's books and videos about childbirth and becoming a big sister or brother.
- If you have been struggling with fatigue or nausea, reassure your child that you are okay and that this is temporary. Explain that you may not be able to give him as much time and attention as you would like to because you aren't feeling well. Make sure that he gets attention at other times, or from someone else.
- For a homebirth, explain what room you will be in and which friends and family will be there. If the birth will not take place at home, take your child on a tour of the facility you will use. Show your child what is all right to touch and what is not. Have your child meet your care provider at least once.
- Check to see if your childbirth educator, midwife, or birthing facility gives a sibling class to prepare for birth.
- Identify a close adult friend or relative who will be your child's support person during labor and birth. This person must be able to be there for the entire birth and be dedicated only to the care of your child, which might include meal preparation, trips to the playground, and diaper changing. This person should practice answering questions ahead of time in simple language like, "Mommy is making those sounds because it helps her to push the baby out." She or he must also be willing to leave the birth if your child wants to leave. This should be someone your child is very comfortable with, someone who would not frighten her if she were the one to wake your child up. If you have more than one older child, consider providing each one with their own support person.
- Role play with your children. Rehearse some of the sounds you may make during labor with them. Try describing events in terms of things they might understand. For example, you can describe the opening of the cervix as like a flower slowly unfolding from a bud.
- Ask your child to help you, both before and during labor, by washing sheets for the homebirth, helping you pick out or make massage oil for the birth, helping you to pack, bringing you a drink of water, or putting a damp cloth on your forehead. Let them practice these steps as well.
- Encourage them to express their feelings about the birth process artistically, in drawings or paintings.
- A child over four might like to create their own birth plan. You can help them to plan this and write it down. They might include things like: "I want to take a picture of the baby," or "I want to rub Mommy's back when she is waiting for the baby to come out." Your child could illustrate the list, if she likes, or decorate it.
- Tell your child the story of their birth. Children usually love to hear about their entrance into the world, and this is a way to give them extra attention while reassuring them that birth is safe and natural.

Sarah Waite and Bonnie Jarvis bring their wealth of experience as early childhood educators, doulas, and mothers of siblings, to their Sibling Preparation Classes. These classes are geared towards helping children feel comfortable, special and ready for the birth of their new baby. Ages 2-6 years. Taught at Pomegranate Community Midwives.