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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Helping a 2-year-old Adjust to a Sibling's Arrival

The following is a question that we received from a parent about helping their 2 ½-year-old son adjust to the arrival of a new sibling. We trust that this advice would be useful for other parents facing a similar life event.

Q. We are expecting a baby in three months. How can we help James, our 2 ½-year-old son, adjust to his new sister?

A. Congratulations on the impending new addition to your family. Our suggestions for helping James have a good start in his sibling relationship are based upon understanding James' perspective on this new event in his life.

A child's perspective: At age 2 ½, James will generally react to situations based on how they affect him personally. In the first week or two after the baby's arrival, James will probably experience many changes. Some might please him: He may have more time with Daddy or with adoring grandparents who arrive to help and bring a gift or two. The long-awaited baby will have her novelties as well. Some changes may displease him: He will be apart from Mommy while she is in the hospital, and he will share her time with another child. With all of these changes, James may feel like the arrival of his sister is as much a holiday as anything else.

James' life will eventually settle into a more stable routine. Babies are not that intrinsically interesting to young children, and he might even be a bit bored. His perspective on his new situation will be influenced by specific, individual factors. For example, if you worked outside the home before his sister's birth, he might actually have more time with you during your maternity leave than before his sister arrived. If you had been home full time, he will have less time with you. Keep individualized factors in mind as you try to understand what his sister's arrival means to him.

The important point is that although there may be some pleasures associated with his sister (making funny faces at her, helping Mommy), and some unpleasant aspects (loud crying, smelly diapers), James will not care much about his sister as a person in her own right. However, he will care a great deal about his relationship with his parents, and he will react to her to the extent that this is affected by his sister's arrival. Furthermore, he will care about and be affected by the nature of the relationship between his mother and father, which is always affected by the arrival of a child, either positively, negatively or some combination of both.

The birth of a sibling provides a profound life challenge for a child. You will be asking James to put aside some of his desires for the sake of his sister and the family. The ability to integrate one's own needs with those of others, whether a family or society, is one of the most admirable and mature qualities that someone could have. How can we help James begin the path toward such integration?

Off to a good start: Sibling relationships are extremely complex and individualized, and much of how your children get along — including how close they eventually become — is outside of your control. However, the less that James associates the arrival of his new sibling with negative changes, the more likely he is to begin his relationship on a positive footing. Here are some things that you can do.

- Talk with James about some of the upcoming changes, to the extent that he is interested. Explain that Mommy will be in the hospital getting stronger after his sister comes out of her body. Grandma will come to help take care of him. Older children can even help with a bit of the preparation, such as choosing a new outfit for the baby.
- Don't expose James to more than he can make sense of. For example, participating in your ultrasound can be confusing and even disturbing.
- Minimize changes that you can control. If James is moving rooms, do this well in advance of the baby's arrival.
- Find ways that James can participate in caring for the baby so that he feels more like the "big brother." However, don't overemphasize how

grown-up James is. He may not be ready to feel “grown up.” What seems like a confidence boost to you may be felt by James as being prematurely pushed out of the nest.

- Accept James’ complaints and even possible outright rejection of his new sibling; just let him know that although he may not always like having a new brother or sister, he will find many things that he does like. If he wants you to take the baby back, tell him that his sister will always be part of the family, that you and Daddy love her very much and are sure that he will learn to love her too. And, you can add, if necessary, that he needs to be kind, no matter how he feels. You may be saying this for years and years!

James will be particularly troubled by any changes in his mommy and daddy. You will be coping with your own feelings. You may have reactions to the birth of the child, often based on your own childhood experience of being or having a sibling. Sometimes this can even affect your mood. You will certainly be more tired, and James will notice.

Explanations, appropriate to his age, will ease his anxiety about change in his mommy. Perhaps you can say, “James, Mommy sometimes sits down for a few minutes and asks you to come over. This is because Mommy is very tired. Soon, I won’t be tired and I won’t have to sit down and rest any more.” By making sense of what is in front of James, you will be respecting and providing meaning to what otherwise might remain fragmented and worrisome observations.

Similarly, if obvious tension develops in your marriage, you might tell James, “Mommy and Daddy are arguing a little bit because we are learning how to be parents of a larger family. Soon we will be able to stop arguing.” This will go a long way to helping James relax and avoid developing negative attitudes toward his sister.

These suggestions are based on an effort to understand James’ needs and perspectives in the context of appropriate expectations. With that orientation, you will help him toward a good start in what can become a rich and rewarding lifetime sibling relationship.