

# The New Kid

**Love eventually conquers all, but expect battles ahead when you add another child to your brood.**

By Cari Jackson



It's easy to lose yourself in daydreams of having a perfect growing family. You bring your newborn home, and your older child immediately takes to cooing over his little sister. From that point forward, you see happy family time, meltdown-free.

Fat chance. "Imagine if you said, 'I'm bringing home a new wife,'" says Cheryl Hausman, M.D., FAAP, medical director of the Children Hospital of Philadelphia's University City Primary Care Center. "This isn't much different." Your child will most likely feel anger and jealousy toward this intruder. Each child expresses it in different ways and to varying degrees, and some children suppress these emotions altogether. But expecting your child to welcome a new baby with complete and unwavering loyalty, Dr. Hausman says, is an "unreasonable expectation."

While jealousy will also appear in older children, Ben Siegel, M.D., FAAP, Professor at Pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine, says the reaction may be particularly strong in egocentric toddlers. "Up to 2 1/2, everything revolves around the child," Dr. Siegel says. "There will be anger," and though he dislikes the term, there could also be regression. You might say goodbye to potty training and hello again to your toddler's desire to breastfeed. "There may be aggression, biting, and kicking," says Dr. Siegel, incoming chair of the AAP Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health.

Children of all ages fluctuate along an emotional scale similar to the Kübler-Ross stages of grief. This scale includes denial,

anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, and is named after the psychiatrist who created it—Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross. “And you don’t stay in acceptance at the very end,” warns Dr. Hausman, herself a mother of six. “Just because a kid says ‘I’m ready’ one day, doesn’t mean they’ll feel that way the next.”

The goal isn’t to stop these emotions — you can’t. Parents can only give children the tools to work through these very real and understandable feelings.

## Lay the Foundation

As soon as parents plan to have another child, they can introduce the idea through conversations and play. “Tell children, ‘You’re going to have a new brother or sister one day because we love kids and we want more than one,’” says Dr. Hausman. She advocates honesty early on. Children will notice changes brewing, and without the proper information, their imaginations may conjure fantasies far worse than reality.

For children under 5, parents can play with baby dolls, describing what babies do. “Kids learn about the world and experience their emotions through play,” Dr. Siegel explains. Parents can read children’s books about new babies (see sidebar). Whether or not a toddler under 2 1/2 appears to understand, these activities plant a seed of awareness.

Preschools play an important role. Let teachers know about the new sibling. “Teachers can use the opportunity to talk with everybody about it,” Dr. Siegel says. There should be a connection in school to the home, because so much play takes place there. Where there is play, there is emotional development.

Once a mother is pregnant, children older than 4 or 5 will ask a lot of questions: how did the baby get in there? How is it going to get out? Siegel encourages parents to take their first opportunity for sex education. Tell them, “When Mommy and Daddy love each other, they make a baby.” Explain to older children that the baby comes out through the birth canal. You might even show them pictures, to which a kid (and plenty of adults) will reply, “Ick.” The important thing is to answer questions honestly, but not with so much detail that you overwhelm the child with too much information for her age.

## Team Family

Every family member should play a role in decision-making. Include children by inviting (but not demanding) their help decorating the nursery, picking out clothes, or choosing a name. Toddlers under 2 1/2 will not want to share, but parents can ask older children, “What special toy of yours would you want to give the baby?”

Reinforce a child’s self-esteem by using special language — “my big boy, my grownup girl.” Now is not the time to push children into major changes, like toilet training. Complete that process months before the baby arrives, or else wait until several months later to begin it.

The AAP supports prenatal pediatric visits. Parents, sans kids, can use this visit to discuss how else they can help their older children, as well as address any other worries they may have.

## D-Day

While it wouldn’t be appropriate for younger children, you may invite a child older than 5 into the delivery room. If your doctor and the hospital allow it and if your child appears emotionally ready, the event could be a powerful bonding experience. If the father needs to be at the mother’s side, make sure someone else can attend to the child at all times.

If your child won’t be present, bring him to meet his new sibling as soon as the baby is born. The shorter the separation between the older child and the family, the more reassuring it will be.

## Home Again

While a newborn demands an exhausting amount of attention, especially from a nursing mother, it is crucial to give older children special attention during this period. Continue to use special language — “big brother,” “my big boy” — to bolster his self-esteem.

Enlist the child’s help in burping the baby, bringing diapers, or singing to the baby. Both parents should plan special outings just with the older child.

Call upon extended family and friends to spend time with the older child. “Children have the capacity to develop attachments to multiple people,” Dr. Siegel says. “The greater the number of attachments, the easier the transition.”

Maintain family rituals. “If somebody used to read at night, if there’s playtime at night, that has to continue,” Dr. Siegel says. Continuity is key.

Children may experience feelings that they don’t recognize. “Parents come in all the time and they’ll say, ‘Oh, he loves giving hugs to the baby,’” Dr. Hausman says. But those “hugs” can be too much for the infant. So, never leave your child alone with a newborn.

“If your child is acting out, you can’t let the behavior slide, but you also have to understand the context,” Dr. Hausman says. Have discussions around the behavior, and use timeouts, especially in response to aggression.

Always ask for rather than demand babysitter services of teenage children. Offer compensation, either in a babysitter’s salary or with privileges. And if they don’t want to do it, respect their wishes.

## Neverending Story

The dismay and the beauty of this transition period is that it never ends. As the new baby grows and gets into the older child’s toys, an older child who has been patient up to this point may lose it. Everyone in the family is constantly adapting to new roles.

“The process of working it out is what families are all about,” Dr. Hausman says. “Enjoying that is the best piece of advice I could give.” ●