

Help your child become a big brother or big sister

Congratulations! As you look forward to the birth of your baby, you are probably experiencing a variety of emotions—excitement and anticipation about meeting your new infant, anxiety over how you will be able to meet the needs of both your children, and concern about how your older child will respond to the baby. We hope the information that follows will help your family enjoy this adventure.

Any change in the family can cause anxiety in a child who is accustomed to comfortable routine and attention. A new baby can make the older child feel that she (or he) has lost control of her world. During the early period of adjustment, expect that your firstborn may "regress" and show some behaviors normally seen in younger children. It's best not to push your child to try a new "grown-up" behavior, such as toilet training, while she is adjusting to the new baby.

Before Baby Arrives

- If your child asks why you are having another baby, don't try to explain. Simply say that your family is having another baby.
- Allow your child to make many small decisions every day such as choosing clothing, some foods, books to look at so that he feels a continued sense of control in his life.
- Use words that convey emotions with your child so that she becomes used to hearing and using words such as "excited," "disappointed," and "sad." This will help her express her emotions with words rather than actions.
- Expect, and allow, your child to have "mixed-up" emotions about the new baby. Your child doesn't have to be excited and happy all the time. Let him know that it is acceptable to express disappointment that a new baby is coming (or has arrived).
- Choose some small gifts and wrap them so you will have a gift on hand for your older child to open when friends bring a gift for the new baby.
- Choose one nice gift for the baby to bring home from the hospital for the older brother or sister. ("Someone who brings me a gift can't be all bad!")
- Make certain that your older child is sleeping now in the same place he will be sleeping when the new baby comes home. Make any changes in sleeping arrangements several months before the baby's birth.
- Let your older child help you make choices for the new baby. Perhaps she can choose the color of the baby's blanket, pick out a new toy for the baby, or decide where the crib will be placed.
- Let your older child play with a doll so he can learn how to hold a baby properly. You can also teach him what "gentle" means: soft, slow, and quiet.
- Read books about becoming a big brother or sister with your child (such as *The New Baby at Your House* by Joanna Cole [Harper Trophy, 1997]). Lovely books that children can enjoy showing the unborn baby's development are also available (*From Conception to Birth: A Life Unfolds* by Alexander Tsiaras [Doubleday, 2002]; *A Child is Born* by Lennart Nilsson and Lars Hamberger [Delacourt, 2003]). And you can show your child her own baby pictures.
- Set aside a special place a box, a drawer, a cupboard for the toys that your older child will not have to share. This is also a great way to keep small toys away from the baby.
- Let your older child go with Mom to medical appointments. Some hospitals have a sibling preparation class, which may be helpful.
- Mom may want to tape record herself reading bedtime stories so your child can listen to them while Mom is in the hospital.

While Mom is in the hospital

- Try to keep your older child's daily routine the same.
- If possible, let your older child come to the hospital to visit and hold the new baby. (And don't forget to bring home baby's gift to the older brother or sister.)
- When your child visits the hospital, Mom should greet him without the baby in her arms.
- Ask your older child to take care of something at home while Mom is in the hospital watering a plant or caring for a pet will help your child feel valued and responsible.

After Baby comes home

- Let your older child hold the baby while sitting in a chair or on a couch so that the baby will be safe.
- Let your older child help take care of the baby bring the diapers, put on lotion, choose an outfit for the baby to wear.
- When both children need you at the same time, take care of the older child first. He needs to know that you are still there to take care of him. The baby can wait for a few minutes for a feeding or diaper change.
- Talk to the baby about how wonderful his big brother or sister is ("Your big sister can ride a tricycle. She'll teach you when you're older.").
- Interpret the baby's behavior in a positive light for the older child ("See how the baby enjoys holding your hand. She likes you.").
- Let your older child hear you use words that express emotion ("I'm disappointed that I can't take you to the park right now.").
- Take pictures of your children, separately and together.
- Arrange your day so that you can spend some time alone with your older child. Give him extra hugs and kisses.