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New babies are a source of great excitement and joy to all in the family. However, they also represent a major change in the family and like any other change, it potentially can be a source of stress and anxiety to your existing children.

The older child may feel threatened. They may think that their special place in the family will be lost, that the attention they currently receive will be gone.

The fact that everyone in the family from parents to uncles and aunts to grandparents seem to be talking about the arrival of the new child does not help. It could confirm their worse fears that the new baby is going to replace them.

So how can parents help prepare their older child in a way that makes them feel secure and excited about the process?

1. Nothing beats direct communication

Just sit your child down and have a frank one to one talk with him or her about the upcoming arrival. What do you say? Just be honest and address all their concerns and fears head on.

You can tell them that you understand they may be feeling a little worried about the coming of the new baby, that they may have mixed feelings about the new child coming; excited on one hand and at the same time just a bit scared because the new baby may change things.

You can tell them that the new baby will change things a bit of course. Tell them that the adults around the house may have to spend some time with the baby at first, because the baby needs a lot of care and looking after but this does not mean that they will be loved any less, or that they will receive any less attention from the other family members.

Nothing is more important than looking your child in the eye and saying “we love you very much. You were precious to us the moment you were born and you will always be special and precious to us, all the time. Never ever forget that.”

2. Give them a role to play

Making them feel part of the “looking-after-the-baby-team” is also key to changing their perspective of the situation. Rather than seeing the new baby as a rival; they start to see the new baby as they kid brother or sister and quickly develop a protective attitude towards them.

Before the baby arrives, for example, you can give them special projects to complete to help get the house ready for the baby. They can help arrange the room for the baby. They can come shopping with you and help choose baby clothes, baby accessories and baby food.

Part of this process can also include some education about babies and their needs. There are a variety of really good books in the children’s section on understanding your new baby pitched at a level that children can understand. They include information on babies feeding needs, how to look after them, how to change them, how to carry them, what parts of their bodies we need to protect and be careful of etc etc. By helping our older child understand better what the baby’s arrival will entail, it gives them an opportunity to mentally prepare themselves for the arrival itself.

Young children enjoy being given responsibilities. This is part of a phase they are going through where they seek independence and a sense of significance through being able to take on constructive roles within the family. If you have a chat with your child before the baby is born and make it clear to them that they are important in the process of caring for the new child, it will help grow the positive anticipation of this new arrival.

The message that we are really sending our older child is this; “this new brother or sister of yours is going to need a lot of love and care, and you are going to be one of the most important persons in

their life. They are going to look up to you, and love you and depend on you. After all, you are their only big brother/sister. So you have a special part to play and I am sure you will play that part well.”

3. Ensure that they are getting enough individual attention

We need to back up our words with action. When we tell our older child that we will still find time for them in spite of the new baby, we need to show proof that we will do it.

It's, therefore, very important that in the months leading up to the birth of the new baby, that we consciously make time to be with our existing children. Play with them, watch TV with them, take them out, continue to do all the things we used to do with them. By doing this we send them the clear message through our actions that: “you are still important to us.”

Conclusion

Parents sometimes can be so busy and focused on the new baby, that we accidentally, unconsciously start to neglect our other kids. This may cause unhealthy forms of sibling rivalry later on. The key is to assure the older child that the baby's arrival in now way changes the fact that they are loved and are precious to the family. This is part of a more important longer term message that “love” is a not a zero sum game; “just because we love another child does not mean we have less love for you”. Lastly, if we provide opportunities for our older children to see themselves as guardians, caregivers to the new child, we defuse the potential rivalry effectively.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010