

# New Baby Blues: The Big Sib

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**S**OPHIE WAS ALMOST THREE WHEN she lost her ‘youngest grandchild’ status. She did not take this well. When baby Eli was around, her behavior regressed. She was whiny and demanding, and took to sucking her thumb. She also became aggressive. Failing to see why her grandmother needed to hold this interloper, Sophie occasionally attempted to dislodge Elijah physically from Memere’s lap. Although Sophie and Eli were cousins, she exhibited classic sibling-like behavior. She felt displaced and jealous, and had no interest in sharing anything with the new baby: not her toys, and certainly not her grandmother’s lap.

Newborns can wreak havoc in the lives of other children. As welcome as they are to parents and grandparents, they are often viewed as nothing more than scene-stealers by their siblings. Think back to your grade school friendships. Did you ever feel jealous when your ‘best friend’ spent more time with someone else than you? Children view their relationship with their parents in much the same light. Most are intensely bonded to mom and dad, and are shocked when they are forced to share their love and attention.

As happened with Sophie, feelings of displacement can cause children to act out. Up to 93% of firstborn children “behave negatively in some way once their baby brothers and sisters are born.”<sup>1</sup> Negative responses may include:

- withdrawal from family activities,
- excessive clinginess,
- reversion to younger behaviors (i.e. thumb-sucking or baby-talk), and
- losing milestones, such as toilet training and sleeping through the night.

PERHAPS MORE PROBLEMATIC TO PARENTS, negative behaviors can also include overt aggressiveness. More than one baby has been ‘accidentally’ knocked over by an older sibling.

A child’s behavior toward a younger sibling depends largely upon her age. Children between 18 months and 4 years old are more likely to have problems with new siblings.<sup>2</sup> Older children understand that their parents have the ability to love more than one child (and the ability to talk through some of their fears and emotions). Very young children tend to be more flexible with changing family circumstances.

It is possible to prepare children for the change in family circumstances brought on by a new baby. As part of the prenatal visit, Bright Futures prompts practitioners to ask:

- Do you have other children? and
- Have you talked with them about your pregnancy?<sup>3</sup>

These questions may help parents to start thinking about the impact of a newborn on their family. Like most adults, children like to be prepared. The extent of advance preparation depends upon the age of the child. Younger children may simply need reassurance about the availability of parental affection. Older children may benefit from sibling classes held at local birth centers. They also may require information on “where babies come from.” With children of any age, it is prudent to deal with other major life changes (such as moving) either far before or well after the baby is born. Too many things to worry about can be overwhelming for a child.

One of the most overwhelming aspects of a newborn to a sibling may be the shifting roles within the house. This doesn’t have to be a negative experience. Instead of feeling displaced, older children can be helped to feel proud of their new status as BIG SIB. This can be accomplished by allowing them to help care (in an age-appropriate way) for the younger sibling. Pre-schoolers may be able to assist in ‘holding the baby,’ while older kids can be involved with feeding tasks. It also helps to give siblings their own special time with a parent or older adult, sans infant. This puts a positive spin on older sibling-hood.

Books also provide an effective way of easing the transition into older sibling-hood (see **Welcoming Baby: Books for Kids**). These can be recommended to parents, or made available in the office waiting room. Adults should be sure to read a new book through before sharing it with a little one. Many deal with the general concept of how babies grow, and how parents are capable of sharing their love with more than one child. Some address more mature themes, such as reproduction. The book choice should be tailored to fit the needs of the child.

Newborns cause older siblings to re-evaluate their place in the family. With help, they will eventually find a new equilibrium. This is true even with cousins. Seventeen months after Elijah’s introduction to the family, Sophie has finally grown more used to the idea. She can be loving, even hugging him at times (albeit with perhaps more vigor than he cares for). She’ll even occasionally share her grandmother’s lap. Just don’t ask her to share her toys.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Talaris Institute, “Life with Baby Brother,” [http://www.talaris.org/spotlight\\_sibling.htm](http://www.talaris.org/spotlight_sibling.htm).

<sup>2</sup> National Network for Child Care, “Helping Children Adapt to a New Sibling,” [http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cc45\\_new\\_sibling.html](http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cc45_new_sibling.html).

<sup>3</sup> Bright Futures, [http://www.brightfutures.org/encounter/provider/pf\\_prenatal.htm](http://www.brightfutures.org/encounter/provider/pf_prenatal.htm).

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# Raising Readers

A Family Health and Literacy Program  
for Maine Children Ages Birth to 5 years

## Welcoming Baby: Books for Kids



### **Baby on the Way**

Written by William and Martha Sears  
and Christie Watts Kelly.

Illustrated by Renee Andriani  
Little, Brown, 2001; ISBN 0316787671

*An entertaining yet realistic look at how a new baby impacts mom and family. "Answers for the Very Curious" for older kids. Breastfeeding Friendly. Ages 4-8.*

### **Happy Birth Day!**

Written by Robie H. Harris

Illustrated by Michael Emberley  
Candlewick Press, 1996; ISBN 1564024245

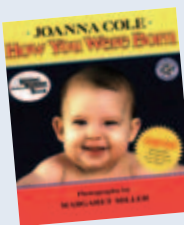
*A loving recounting of baby's first hours. Breastfeeding Friendly. Ages 4-8.*

### **How You Were Born**

Written by Joanna Cole

Photographs by Margaret Miller  
HarperCollins, 1993; ISBN 068812061X

*A non-threatening look at reproduction and baby-hood. Racially diverse. Breastfeeding friendly. Ages 3-8.*



### **The New Baby at Your House**

Written by Joanna Cole  
Photographs by Margaret Miller  
William Morrow Books, 1998; 0688166989

*Real families deal with the new babies in their lives. An updated classic. Racially diverse. Breastfeeding friendly. Baby-preschool.*

### **Waiting for Baby**

Written by Harriet Ziefert

Illustrated by Emily Bolam  
Henry Holt and Company, 1998; ISBN 0805059296

*Max waits with happy impatience for his new sister to be born. Ages 4-8.*

### **We Have a Baby**

Written by Cathryn Falwell

Clarion Books, 1993; ISBN 0395739705

*What having a baby means to big sibling and family, in simple text. Racially diverse. Breastfeeding friendly. Baby-preschool.*



### **Welcome, Little Baby**

Written and illustrated by Alike  
Greenwillow Books, 1987; ISBN 0688068103

*A touching tribute to a little one and her place in the world. Breastfeeding friendly. Baby-preschool.*

### **What's Inside**

Written by Jeanne Ashbe  
Kane/Miller, 2000; ISBN 0916291979

*A whimsical lift-the-flap book exploring the joys of special packages—including Mom's pregnant belly. Preschool.*

Sharing books can be an effective way of helping siblings prepare for a new baby. Parents and providers should be sure to preview them first, to make sure they are both age and developmentally appropriate.