No Fair!

Dealing with Toddler Jealousy

By Alex Powell

When Cindy Vance gave birth to her second child last September, she felt confident that her oldest would be fine with his new baby brother. Holton, then 3 years old, was a secure and well-adjusted child, and Vance, who directs a Montessori preschool in West Monroe, La., had spent plenty of time preparing him for the baby’s arrival.

About a week after baby Aubrey came home from the hospital, her perceptions changed. Holton developed a raging case of sibling rivalry. “He was very verbal about it,” says Vance. “He would tell us, many times, ‘Let’s just send him back to God. Let’s give him back.’ It was pitiful.”

Jealousy worries parents. When a toddler is having trouble adjusting to a younger sibling, it’s common to wonder if you’ve done something wrong. But that’s not the case, says Dr. Sybil Hart, professor of human development and family studies, associate dean of research of the College of Human Sciences at Texas Tech University and author of Preventing Sibling Rivalry: Six Strategies to Build a Jealousy-Free Home (Free Press, 2001).

"Parents shouldn’t feel guilty if their child feels jealous or if they see it in their child," says Dr. Hart. "Jealousy is a normal trait, not a character flaw, and we just have to figure out a way to handle it so it doesn’t cause any harm."

Relax, It’s Totally Normal

While it’s commonly believed that secure children won’t be as jealous of their siblings, the reverse may be true. Children who have been well nurtured have very high expectations of their parents. "[Jealousy in] a very young child really just means that they are attached and they are telling you how they feel [about having to share you with another child]," says Dr. Hart.

It’s also reassuring to understand that bringing a younger sibling into the picture doesn’t "cause" jealousy. The ability to feel jealousy is a gradual developmental process. Babies are loved and nurtured, and they develop certain expectations about the care they are going to receive. When a sibling enters the picture, jealousy is often unmasked for the first time, but the potential to become jealous has been there for a while.

Does sibling rivalry mean you haven’t properly prepared your child for a younger brother or sister? No, says Dr. Hart. In fact, it may be almost impossible to truly prepare a young child for the birth of a new sibling.

Toddlers have a very simple understanding of words, says Dr. Hart, and words for emotions are very abstract to them. "Certain emotions, like happy and sad, can be linked with a facial expression," she says. "But a complex feeling like jealousy is very, very difficult for a child to actually understand. So while the 2- and 3-year-old is capable of feeling jealousy, he probably isn’t capable of articulating what it feels like or able to understand when parents discuss it."

And at its core, jealousy "is about changes in one’s status in a relationship," says Dr. Hart. While it is important to try to keep the disruption in the toddler’s life to a minimum and make changes
well in advance, no amount of planning will change the fact that your toddler is no longer the only baby in the house.

**Not Too Close for Comfort**

My own son had just turned 2 years old when we had twin girls. Life was turned upside down, and on the many nights when I found myself feeding two infants with one hand and reading a board book to a toddler with the other, I often wondered if wider spacing would have been a better idea.

But in the long run, having children close together may cause fewer jealousy issues than spacing births far apart. Closely spaced children are more likely to become friends and playmates, simply because they have more in common than siblings spaced wide apart. In some cases, "the biggest incentive that an older child has not to clobber the baby is that if he does, he won't have anybody to play with!" says Dr. Hart.

More notably, when siblings are close in age, the care they receive from parents is often similar, and to a small child, that can make it appear more fair. "Twins, as I understand it, really have some tremendous advantages," says Dr. Hart. "Here you have two children who are the same age. They go to bed at the same time, they eat ice cream with the same number of scoops and usually one isn’t much bigger than the other. It’s very easy to treat them the same, and that makes it appear more equitable."

Finally, keep in mind that young children express themselves very differently than older kids or adults. When measuring jealousy in adults, we tend to judge actions, not thoughts or feelings. But for a small child, his actions are his feelings.

Brooke Hadley, a mom from Austin, Texas, thought she had "created a monster" when her oldest child, then a 2-year-old, began hitting, pushing and kicking his 6-month-old brother. "We learned that Skylar was mad at Drew for getting into his trains in his room, and he didn’t have the words to express his anger," says Hadley. The behavior resolved once Hadley was able to reassure her child that she would help protect his toys from the baby. "I told him, 'It hurts the baby very badly when you hit. From now on, when he gets your trains, yell for help, and I’ll help you.'"

**How to Deal**

Keeping the home environment non-competitive may help prevent some sibling rivalry, especially as your younger child grows, says Dr. Hart. When buying toys for kids spaced close in age, it’s often a good idea to have some sets of very similar toys. "You don’t even have to buy toys," says Dr. Hart. "Just take out 14 margarine containers that are identical. Toddlers will still take them from each other, but it is much more playful."

And you don’t have to feel like you’re cheating by doing this, adds Dr. Hart. "[If you send your kids to the sandbox with the exact same toys], don’t tell yourself ‘I should’ve brought one blue one and one green one and made them share,’” she says. "They’ll learn sharing somewhere along the way, and you don’t have to try to do that with a 3-year-old and a 1-year-old. It’s more difficult than it needs to be."

Six months after becoming a big brother, Vance’s oldest son is warming up to the baby. "Partly, I think, because he has adjusted to the fact that Aubrey is just a fixture in the family now and partly because Aubrey can do more," says Vance. "He can sit up, he can interact. Holton still has his rough spots, but he’s doing much better!"