

How Toddlers Thrive

move is this: once you are settled in to the new place, give your child space to be sad or angry and miss his old home (even if he loves his new one!). As the examples in this chapter show, letting go and missing the old is a necessary step toward coming together and embracing the new. Loss has to be recognized. For some children (and adults), the process takes time. Your child may focus on one seemingly small point to express their emotions about moving.

Four-year-old Laura cried each night when she went to sleep in her new house. "I miss the blue light outside my window. I can't sleep without it." Laura used to look at a blue light on the apartment building next door through her bedroom window. She thought of it as a night-light. Her parents talked to her about it, about how much she missed that light, and that sleeping in a new house felt funny. They gave her a narrative about their old house and bedroom and the new. They recognized her feelings of excitement but also sadness and worry. And then, one night, Laura unexpectedly announced, "I love my new bed. I like the purple sheets. And I don't like that blue light anyhow!" It takes time to adjust.

• New Baby •

The addition of a new sibling is big. It is exciting for the parents, but worrisome, too. It can also disrupt a child's sense of safety and security and the world as they know it. A new sibling is an upheaval for them.

One toddler, when told that his mother was going to have a baby soon, pondered this news. He then asked, "Who will be the baby's mommy?" When told that his mommy would be, but he would always be her first baby and her only

Liam, he stopped. He listened. Later, after his nap that day, he awoke with this pointed question: "Who decided you would be the baby's mommy?!"

Can you imagine sharing the one or two most important people in the world with someone else? Probably not. Becoming a big brother or sister brings up plenty of mixed feelings. Of course there is a lot of excitement. But children cannot be sure what it is all about. Will you still be my mommy? My daddy? Will you still love me? What is *really* inside mommy's belly? I think we, as parents, have a parallel set of mixed feelings, too. Letting go of the current family to welcome a new baby is also a change.

For your toddler, this trajectory of feelings is all extremely abstract. Your child goes from being your one and only (or if more than one child, maybe your toddler is the youngest, your baby right now) to being a big sibling, to sharing parents, to having a crying baby in the house. Imagine how confusing it is to your child. And the anticipation is usually the hardest part (for the parents, too!). That is why I stress that you wait and tell them as late in pregnancy as possible. Time is a concept they do not grasp. And the greater the lead time, the more anxiety that can set in.

Jade's parents could not wait to tell her about the new baby coming. As much as I encouraged them to wait until it was closer, they were sure she needed to know now. She was nearly four when her parents told her the news that in three months she would be a big sister. "I don't want to be a big sister," Jade responded. "I just want to be Jade." They reassured her that she would still be Jade, their biggest girl. But she would have none of it. "I am baby Jade now. We don't need more babies!" At other times, she announced what was hers and what she would not share. "Guess we will have to get another play room

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for that baby. This is *my* play room.” She vacillated between being the big girl she liked to be and being a baby. She would lie on the floor, pretend to cry, and say, “I am the baby. Pick me up.” One day she announced, “I am a very special baby. Very special. No new babies needed here.”

Each morning when she awoke, she excitedly asked the same thing: “Is the new baby coming today?!” Of course, they had a long time to wait. For three months, the same question came nearly every day. And disappointment and anger followed when the answer was no. They came to see me because the day-to-day questioning of when the baby would come led to meltdowns, anger, and defiance. I suggested that they talk as little about the baby as possible, and tell Jade that the baby was not coming for a long, long time. Give her a focal point. When I was pregnant with my third baby, I told the older two that the baby would come after springtime started, when we had flowers and leaves on trees. Toddlers need a concrete frame—when winter starts and it is cold outside, after we have Christmas, after your school ends.

Often toddlers regress and show babyish behaviors as they anticipate the new baby coming (and after the arrival): whining, quick to cry, wanting to be held more, to play baby, and be rocked (even at four and five!). Indulge these needs for comfort and remind them, “You will always be my baby. Even when this tiny little new baby is here. You are always my baby, and we are always your mommy and daddy.”

Once the baby is here, toddlers, even up to age five, will have lots of ambiguous feelings toward a new sibling—love/hate, aggression toward baby and mommy. I don’t mean to say they won’t love their sibling—it is truly a gift you are giving them. And when they show their love, it can be poignant and immense. But don’t overlook that they also feel confused and mis-

placed. They are now sharing mommy and daddy, and jealousy is a natural feeling. Someone else is sharing in the attention they crave for themselves. Therefore they need continual reassurance that mommy and daddy still love them, will take care of them, and never lose sight of them in their hearts—no matter how many other siblings may join the family, and no matter what they are thinking or feeling about the new addition.

Preparing for the New Baby

A few weeks before the due date, but not too far ahead, explain to your child that soon the baby will be ready to come out. The key is to give them the basic plan so they have an idea of what will happen, but without too much detail. With all the excitement over a new baby, there is still one thing that matters most: their own well-being. So the main thing they want to know is that they will be cared for and okay and that you will still be their mommy and daddy. Too much information is overwhelming. Explain in clear and simple language that just like you did when he was born, mommy and daddy will go to the hospital and the doctor (or midwife) will help the baby come out. And then soon daddy and mommy will bring your new baby home. We will all be a family. Let him know who will stay when you go to the hospital, and assure your child that you will be back.

At our school we recommend that parents place a photo of the older child(ren) in the baby's bassinet. When your child visits at the hospital (and it is fine if you are not feeling up to it, they do not have to visit), their new brother or sister will be in the bassinet with the photo taped to the side. When my first child came to visit (he was twenty-three months), I showed him the photo in the bassinet and said, "Your new brother was look-

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ing at you. He wants to meet you." Make it all about your toddler, as if the baby were here only for them. For weeks at home, I'd say to my two-year-old, "Look! The baby is looking for you. He is smiling at you. He wants to know where his brother is," and so on. The baby was here in the service of his big brother and that made his brother feel part of it and important. Many parents have a gift from the new baby ready to give to the older sibling. My son had the stuffed monkey on his bed for years and called it his "Baby Monkey" because the baby gave it to him at the hospital.

What to Expect When the Baby Is Home

Yes, a new baby in the family is exciting. But from your child's point of view, it is not all it is cracked up to be. People may be saying, "Isn't it great that you are a big sister now? Your baby is so wonderful." And she may be thinking, *What's so great about it? Doesn't feel fun to me. Mommy is with baby. Baby cries a lot. Everyone is tired. Baby does not play. Not fun!* So, expect your child to behaviorally express how she likely feels inside. That can be acting out, tantrums, or most likely regression at some point. If she was toilet trained, she may be back to diapers or may have more accidents. Your child may wake up at night, even if she had not before. He may want to get in the baby's crib, play with the infant toys, or be rocked like a baby. He may become more possessive of his toys than he was in the past, grabbing and hoarding. "That's mine!" I often see children at the Toddler Center taking lots of crackers at snack time, as many as their hands can hold against their bodies, when there is an infant at home. Why? They feel intruded upon by the new family member and feel a strong desire to get everything they need. This passes in time.

What your child needs most is the comfort of knowing it is still okay to be a baby, your baby. By meeting these needs they will feel taken care of and better able to be the capable child they are. You can play baby games in a lighthearted and fun way with your child of any age. "Baby Fiona [who is four years old!] wants her bottle, here is a bottle for you tiny baby." Then in an equally fun way remind her, "Wait! Babies can't eat pizza or ice cream. You eat pizza and ice cream. You are my four-year-old Fiona! And my baby, too." She needs to feel baby and big without feeling ashamed at the mix of emotions inside of her.

The good news is that toddlers do like to help and be on the parental side. Even your two-year-old can be part of it. Ask them to grab a diaper or a burp cloth, and tell the baby that their sister or brother is helping take care of them. This empowers your child and provides them that sense of agency ("I have a role in this") that they thrive on.

And all those times you need to feed the baby, rock, pat, or put him to sleep? Remind your older one that as soon as you are done with the (feeding, diapering . . .), you will be able to play just with them. Find alone moments, even if it is just long enough to read a book together, or when you are putting your older one to sleep or driving to school. In these alone moments, highlight the exclusive time with your child. "It is only Mommy [or Daddy] and David right now. No baby here. She has to stay home. We'll see her later." Your child will relish these alone times. When toddlers come to our center, if there is a new baby or infant at home, we remind them, "There are no babies here. Your baby has to stay home; this school is only for you." The child usually lights up, often with a huge grin. He will then strut into school, feeling so big (and happy to be without that little baby for now). Later, when their baby arrives with Mommy or

Daddy at pickup, they often run and embrace their little sibling, happy to see them after a break.

When Will My Baby Play with Me?

Toddlers are all about “Me.” I think the hardest part for toddlers is that from their point of view, newborns not only take attention away, they are simply dull and boring. There is lots of hype about a new baby coming, and then here is this baby who does very little as far your child is concerned. They cry, burp, poop, sleep, and steal attention, but they don’t play! They are not fun! Connect to these feelings in your child. The more you can recognize the downside and negative feelings, the more freed they are to love their sibling—over time. Talk about a transition! Life was good before with just me and my parents. And now hours a day are spent waiting for Mommy, waiting for Daddy, deferring to the baby’s needs, giving up what they had before. It is a loss. I spent much of my time saying to my older kids, “Oh, this baby is crying *again*. Can you believe it?” Or “He needs me to change him, *again*. Sure does need to be changed a lot.” Your older one will likely give you a look of “Oh, she does get it. This *is* dull for me!” Let them know you understand what is on their mind and how they feel, that sometimes they like the baby and sometimes they don’t. They will feel relieved, which frees them up to love their sibling, too, even if they can’t always show it.

Aggression

It is understandable that children have some anger related to the new baby and the transition to being the “older” child. Remember, transitions stir a lot of emotions, and this is a par-

code on Transitions
ticularly *big* transition. I find that if parents know that anger is possible (and likely!), they are less taken aback by it. Yes, the toddler loves the baby, they are less angry over the baby, their together their relationship can blossom. No one shares a history like siblings do. And yes, they also are angry over the baby, their new sibling. Life was fine before and now there is an interloper. Some children get more upset than others. Some show it openly; some hold it in. There is often a honeymoon period before your child realizes that baby is here to stay for good. Many will do the hug-to-death-grip move where they hug the infant or newborn and the hug turns to an all-out squeeze. Keep your hands close to loosen the grip! But what this says is that your child has mixed feelings—it is love and it is anger, all tied together. Normal. As it should be.

It is not uncommon for children to show aggression—hitting, pushing, or biting—as an outlet for these mixed feelings after the birth of a new baby. It can happen soon after the baby is home or anytime in that first year. One mother called me and said, “He loves his newborn brother so much. He hugs him and says, ‘Oh baby Will, I wuv you.’ But then we go to the playground and he will randomly bite some child. He never showed aggression before, ever.” But this is also a transition he has never weathered before. A father said to me, “Our toddler went from being a quiet and really good kid to one I am practically afraid to take anywhere. She is biting us or her baby sister, and if we are not vigilant, she can really hurt.” And another parent said to me when her infant was six months old, “I thought we had sailed through the new-baby thing without any hitting or aggression. But now that the baby is sitting up, my older one is hitting me, so often. What is going on?!”

I don't mean to scare you. Aggression can worry or scare any parent. I understand why. But what is going on in these exam-

ples is normal at these ages. The three toddlers in the examples are all normal, healthy, and yes, sweet children. But adjusting to a new baby is fraught with ups and downs, and confusion. Underlying this are many mixed feelings they cannot understand. So be sure to recognize this and let them have outlets for it. "You can be angry at the baby. But I can't let you hurt her. Here is a doll [or pillow] that you can hit instead." If you can be accepting of the anger (which can be hard to do!), they will get more comfortable with it, too, and act out less. Sometimes parents worry that giving them a place to be angry—hitting a pillow or biting a doll or teddy bear—will increase their anger. I have never found that to be the case. In fact, just the opposite is true. When adults give them a contained place to be angry, it validates their anger and lets them know they are not alone. This brings their arousal and anger down, which actually helps them learn to manage the negative feelings and feel less upset.

• Starting School •

Going to school is another transition most young children face, whether it is their first school experience, returning after summer, or changing schools. They are used to the comforts of home, or the routines of the old school, or last year's classroom, and now they will start in a new place. Keep in mind that there is a lot to master in this transition. School presents all sorts of challenging newness: a new physical environment, new teachers and unknown classmates, new rules. A simple question such as "Where do I put my coat?" can be worrisome. *Who will comfort me if I miss mommy or daddy?* Think about your own experiences. Do you recall starting a new job and having the anxiety over where you would go for lunch, or where the bathroom was? Toddlers feel this way. There are new adults