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A Psychological Guide for Families: Siblings Helping your children to live with and learn from each other Child and Family Psychology & Therapies Service

Introduction

This booklet is part of a series that has been written by Clinical Child Psychologists from the Gwent Child and Family Psychology & Therapies Service. Many parents and carers experience some concerns about their children and at times look outside of their family for extra advice or suggestions. We hope that this booklet will add some ideas to the things that you are already doing. Many suggestions are given in this booklet, and all of the ideas given have been helpful to families. Choose the ideas that fit for you, your child and your family

Growing up with a new brother or sister

Rivalry is very common between brothers and sisters of any age. When a new baby arrives into the family, you and your child make a huge adjustment in accepting the new baby. Other family relationships will usually change in some way too.

It means that individuals' roles may change within the family too, e.g. the only child becomes the older sibling, and the baby becomes the youngest child. It is good to tell your child in advance not only that a new baby is coming into the family but also about some of the things that might happen as a result. For example:-

- That your child will be sharing parents
- That the baby will require lots of time and attention.

It is important to paint a balanced picture, so share both positive aspects of the new arrival as well as the anticipated difficulties. Your child needs to know that it is ok not to feel positive about the new baby all the time and that he/she might well feel jealous, angry, insecure and upset when his/her needs have to wait.

In fact, your child might become quite bad-tempered and upset and you might find his/her behaviour more difficult to manage. He/she might revert back to using behaviour seen at an earlier stage of development.

All this is an absolutely normal part of adjustment but requires a lot of patience and understanding on the part of parents. You might find that extended family and friends can be useful when as parents, you become less available to your older child.

Some helpful practical tips

- Try to avoid too many other life changes occurring at the same time as the new arrival: starting playgroup or house moves are best delayed if possible.
- Make arrangements for the care of your older child during your delivery and hospital stay well in advance, so everyone is clear about what is happening.
- Encourage and praise any interest and loving gestures made towards the new baby whilst ignoring, as far as possible, unwanted responses or commenting on what your older child might be feeling e.g. it must be so hard to see Mummy looking after baby and not be able to do things with you so much! You are having to learn to wait – it's a hard thing to learn, I wonder how I can help you?
- Find small, manageable tasks for your older child to do to encourage his/her involvement with the new baby. If your child is not keen, don't push, but express your pleasure for any help you do receive.
- Try to arrange some special, baby-free time so your older child can enjoy some time alone with you.
- Be firm about more serious unacceptable behaviour. Make it clear to your child that it is the behaviour and not him/her that is unacceptable. Be clear about the kind of behaviour you would prefer to see and show your child how to behave in this way. Encourage and praise attempts to do this. Help your children in their attempts with this.

Relationships between older siblings

Research shows us that just because there is conflict between brothers and sisters, this does not necessarily mean that there is also a lack of affection, co-operation and support for each other.

Even arguments between siblings provide opportunities for children to try out different ways of dealing with conflict and with parents' support, can help children to become more assertive.

Some helpful practical tips

- Instead of dismissing negative feelings about a brother or sister, acknowledge these feelings for your child. E.g. when your child says "Billy's trying to wind me up", you could acknowledge their feelings by
 - a) Putting them into words, "I bet that gets you really annoyed"
 - b) Expressing what your child might wish, "You wish he'd leave you in peace"
 - c) Suggesting creative outlets for these feelings, "Maybe you could draw a picture of how annoyed you feel, or write down your feelings in a letter to your sister".
- Teach your child how to release angry feelings safely by encouraging him/her to express feelings to his/her brother or sister with words rather than actions, e.g. "Tell him how angry you are with words. Tell him 'I don't want you to call me names like that again'".
- Try to resist the urge to compare your children with one another, as this encourages them to see themselves as competing for your approval.
- Try to treat your children uniquely. Try to split your time with your children according to their needs rather than the number of minutes you have spent with each of them. This will help your children to see themselves as individuals sharing your time rather than competing for it.

- Try not to let yourself, your child or his/her brother or sister lock your child into a negative role, e.g. as a mean child or as a bully. Help your child to see that even if he/she can act in an unkind way at times, he/she can also be loving and thoughtful at other times.
- It can be unhelpful to think of children with problems as “problem children”. Try to accept their frustrations, appreciate what they have accomplished, however imperfect and help them build upon these strengths.
- Handling fighting

a) For normal bickering – try to give your children opportunities to resolve their own conflicts

b) If the situation heats up, try acknowledging their anger, reflecting each child's point of view, describing the problem in a neutral way, giving the message that you have confidence in the children's abilities to find their own solution and then try leaving the room.

c) For some situations, try describing what you see from your children and then separating them. They can readdress the problem with each other when they have cooled down.

- Encourage your children to negotiate and compromise together, finding their own resolutions to problems.
- Remember to notice when they have got on well together and managed potential conflicts on their own.

General Summary

Brother and sister relationships are the longest relationships we can expect to have. Even if brother and sisters struggle to get on when they are younger, they often grow closer and get on better when they grow older.

We hope that you have found some ideas in this booklet that you would like to try out. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can get worse before they get better. It can be hard to keep going, but many families tell us that it is worth persevering.

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1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	1	2	3	4	5	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

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Please return to
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