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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 written by Clinical Psychologists from the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board Child and Family Psychology & Therapies Service. Parents and carers may sometimes experience concerns about their children and may look outside of their family for extra advice or suggestions. We hope that this booklet can provide some additional thoughts and ideas to help to think through your concerns. There are many suggestions offered in this booklet which have been helpful for families; please choose the ideas that fit for you, your child, and your family.

## **Growing up with a new sibling**

Rivalry is very common between siblings of any age. When a new baby arrives into the family, it is a huge adjustment for everyone and can impact on all relationships within the family.

Individuals' roles may change within the family too, e.g., the only child becoming the older sibling. 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 with a new baby sibling
- That the new 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 and that they might well feel jealous, angry, insecure and upset when their needs have to wait.

In fact, your child might become quite bad-tempered and upset and you might find their behaviour more difficult to manage. They might revert back to using behaviour seen at an earlier stage of development and may make more attempts to become the focus of your attention.

All of 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 reaching out to

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 and convey acceptance for 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 their 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 their behaviour that is unacceptable rather than their feelings or them as a person. 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 siblings, 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, respect boundaries and develop empathy for others.

### **Some helpful practical tips**

- Instead of dismissing negative feelings about their sibling, acknowledge these feelings for your child. E.g., when your child says "They are trying to wind me up", you could acknowledge their feelings by:
  - a) Putting their feelings into words, "I bet that gets you really annoyed"
  - b) Expressing what your child might be thinking, "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 them to express feelings to you as parents, and if appropriate, to their sibling with words rather than actions e.g., *"tell them that it is upsetting when they call you names"*
- 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 their sibling lock your child into a negative role, e.g., as a 'problem' child or as a bully. Help your child to see that even if they can may behave in ways that we do not agree with, they are an important and valued member of the family
- Handling fighting
  - a) For normal bickering – try to give your children opportunities to resolve their own conflicts whilst maintaining physical and emotional safety
  - b) If the situation escalates, try acknowledging their anger, reflecting each child's point of view, describing the problem in a neutral way and helping to scaffold an appropriate repair e.g., "Gosh, you are so angry at your brother for taking your toy. You got so mad that you hit him. I wonder if we take some time to play separately for a little while then come back to play a game that you can both play together"
  - c) For some situations, you may need to separate them, and then when things have cooled down, you might be able to try describing what you saw in a neutral way.
- As children get older, you may find moments where you can 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

Sibling relationships are the longest relationships we can expect to have. Even if siblings 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 of the ideas in this booklet helpful. In our experience, change can be a difficult process for everyone in the family, and things can feel worse before they get better. It can feel hard to keep going. Please remember to reach out to those around you in times of difficulty and that these feelings are not uncommon to experience.

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1. How easy is this booklet to understand?

Not at all easy	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	Very easy

2. How helpful are the ideas in this booklet?

Not at all helpful	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	Very helpful

3. What might you do differently now that you have read this booklet?

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Siblings - Helping your children to live with and learn from each other	

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Please return to Child and Family Psychology and Therapies Service  
 Llwyn Onn, Grounds of St Cadoc's Hospital  
 Lodge Road, Caerleon, Newport NP18 3XQ

**“This document is available in Welsh /  
 Mae’r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg”.**