

How to cope with a toddler and a new baby

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Managing your toddler

If you're pregnant and already have a toddler, the chances are you're already having sleepless nights about how your older child is going to be affected by the new arrival -- and also, how on earth you're going to cope with yet another little person's needs to juggle. Try not to worry too much -- remember that, this time around, you'll be an expert where the baby is concerned. But it's worth thinking through a few key issues beforehand.

When should we tell our toddler there's going to be a new baby?

In a nutshell, not too early. Seven or eight months' time is light years away for a 20 month old -- you might as well tell her about something that will happen when she's 21. On the other hand, toddlers are amazingly astute -- so your ballooning body will catch her eye at some point, and that will probably prove a good moment to spill the beans. Tell her there's a new baby growing inside -- let her pat your tummy gently and say hi to the baby if she wants to. She might enjoy coming along to an [prenatal appointment](#) and listening to your baby's heartbeat, too. Once you've told her there's a baby on the way, mention it frequently but don't go overboard with details or too much information -- the truth is that your toddler will only have an inkling of what's in store because no small child can really understand the difference a baby makes until after the birth, and even then probably not for quite some time.

What else should we do to prepare her?

One of the most important things to do is to cherish the time when there's just you and her, because life will be different -- at least for a while -- and it's worth making the most of the one-to-one relationship you have at the moment. On the other hand, you need to make sure she'll be happy with the people who will look after her around the time the baby is being born, so take opportunities to give her time with her grandparents, aunts and uncles and close friends who will be lined up to help.

It's hard for a toddler to understand what a new baby is all about, but one good way to prepare is by looking through your photo albums and talking about when she was tiny. Explain that the new baby will be like this too, and that he or she will get bigger and do more things, just as she has done. Don't tell your toddler that the new baby will be "a friend for you" because, for the first year or so at least, this is unlikely to be the case -- indeed, from her point of view the newcomer is more likely to be a hindrance before she becomes an ally. Read our article on [sibling rivalry](#) for more ideas on preparing your toddler for a new baby.

How can we cope around the birth?

Even if you're having a [home birth](#), and certainly if you're going to hospital, you'll need a list of family and friends who are willing to look after your toddler when you go into labour. Make sure you keep a list of their mobile phone numbers with you at all times so you can alert them as early as possible to the fact that you'll soon be calling on their services -- and brief them carefully about how much you want them to say about the baby's arrival, sex etc. If you or your partner wants to be the person who tells them about a new brother or sister, don't let grandma get in first.

The first meeting is often seen as a crucial litmus test of the sibling relationship, but most people believe it has little bearing on the long term. All the same, you want to get it right. Best advice is to try to make sure the baby is in the cot when your toddler makes her entrance -- so your arms are still there to cuddle her, and so you can explore the newborn together.

You and your toddler may both feel a bit tearful about being apart if you're in hospital for a few days, for example if you have a caesarean section. It's easier for you both to cope if your toddler is in the continual care of your partner, another relative or close friend. Many dads say that they really bonded with their toddler at the time when their second baby was born. Have a few little treats lined up to give your toddler in hospital when she visits and to ease her time at home without you.

How will we manage in the early days and weeks?

It will be hard at times, but it won't be impossible. Here are our top tips on how to cope.

- Prepare as much as possible beforehand. Cook and freeze meals while you're still pregnant so you've a good supply of nutritious food to see you all through the early days after the birth.
 - Don't be too proud to accept offers of help -- and don't be afraid to suggest really useful things friends could do.
 - Lower your expectations of how the house will look during the first few weeks. You've got a lot on your plate, and it doesn't really matter if the dusting doesn't get done or you have to wear un-ironed clothes for a few days.
 - As soon as you can, try to get out for at least a short walk every day -- it's amazing what a boost it is to get out of doors.
 - Make your toddler aware from the very start that the baby is interested in her, is watching her and loves her. Say things like, "She's following your game with her eyes" and "She's very interested in what you're doing".
 - Involve her in games with the baby from the earliest days, and always tell your toddler how much you value her help and assistance with helping at bathtime and so on.
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