

Helping your Child with ASD Adjust to New Siblings

After the baby's birth

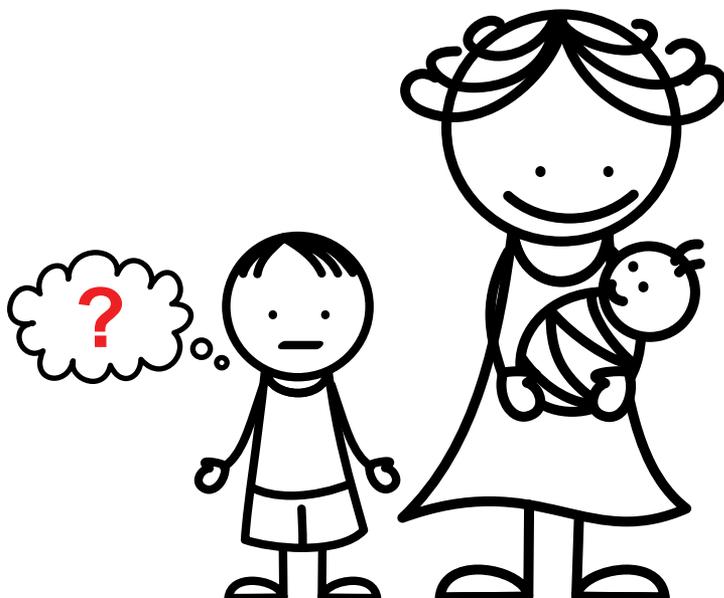


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After the baby's birth



The time following the birth of your new baby can be both a joyous and demanding time. As a mother, you may be dealing with post delivery physical complications, be continually exhausted, and feel stressed by trying to meet the very different needs of a newborn and a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). When your older child has ASD, his/her ability to cope with all the changes that come with having baby in the home may be much more complicated than a typically developing sibling. Your child may need additional consideration, support and attention to cope with this dramatic change in his/her life.

Why might it be difficult for my child with ASD?

Many siblings struggle with mixed feelings when the new baby is born—worried about mom rushing off to the hospital, excited about meeting the new baby, disappointed that parents are so busy with the baby, and proud that they can help out with some of the care of the baby. When your child has ASD, these mixed feelings may be more intense depending on his/her level of functioning and unique traits associated with ASD.



Communication:

Many children with ASD struggle with being able to communicate verbally with others, so it may be difficult for them to ask questions they may be wondering about, or talk about emotions they may be feeling. Many have challenges understanding what is said to them so your child may not understand information told to him/her about where mom will go to deliver the baby, how long she will be gone, the birth process, what having a new baby will be like and safety rules that need to be in place once the baby is home. Depending on your child's developmental level, he/she may not understand that a baby is different than a toy and that babies can be easily hurt.

Managing Change:

Children with ASD often have difficulty with managing changes – big and small. Having a new baby in the house leads to many changes – availability of mom and dad/other family members, changes in rules (need to be quiet when baby is sleeping), changes in sleeping routines (child may need to move to his/her own bed, a different bedroom), and changes in caregivers while mom is in hospital and then when home when busy with the baby. These are just a few of the potential changes that may be very upsetting to your child with ASD. Some children with ASD have difficulty managing strong emotions like anger and frustration, and may react by having more intense tantrums and other unpredictable behaviour.

Sensory Considerations:

Children with ASD may also experience sensory input differently than others. They may be very sensitive to sounds, smells and touch, or they may seek out that kind of sensory input. New babies tend to be very loud when they cry and have very smelly diapers. Babies may reach out and grab hair or feel very heavy when placed in your child's arms or lap. This sensory input may be overwhelming to your child and his/her behaviour may be impulsive and reactive. Children with ASD that are under sensitive may seek out sensory input and may not realize they are being rough when they are trying to touch, hold or even smell the baby.

What can I do to support my child with ASD after the new baby is born?



Have your child visit the hospital very soon after the baby is born.

Your trip to the hospital might have come as a surprise to your child despite any preparations you had made. Reducing the amount of time that your child has to wait to see you may minimize the stress he/she may feel. Also when your child arrives to see you, ensure that only immediate family is there so as to ensure that you can give all your attention to your child with ASD. Take photos of your child's visit with mom and the baby to review at home while mom remains in hospital.

Have the baby in the bassinette or nursery when your child arrives to see you.



Avoid having the baby in your arms or breast feeding when your child first arrives as it might be very upsetting for him/her to see mom caring for someone else right away. Spend some time with your child with ASD first and then introduce him/her to the baby. Having your child help to choose the clothing or dress the baby in preparation to go home -only if he/she is interested- may help him/her to feel a part of the happy occasion.

Consider exchanging gifts between the baby and your child with ASD.

By selecting and having your child give the baby a small gift and having your child receive a small gift from the baby, you may increase your child's positive feelings about the baby.

Sometimes children feel very left out when they see gifts for only the baby arriving at the hospital and at home.



Always be aware of potential safety issues and plan to prevent them.

Do not ever leave your child with ASD unattended with the baby.



Even children who appear to be gentle and happy about having a baby can have behaviour that is unpredictable and potentially dangerous to an infant. Review your layout of your home and ensure you have a safe spot (play pen, crib, car seat) in most rooms in which you can place your baby if you have to attend to any behaviours of your child with ASD. Continue to practice using the safe words (stop, gentle) to ensure your child remembers to immediately respond to them.

Feed your baby on the couch so you can include your other child.

Whether you are breast or bottle feeding, feeding your baby often takes a significant amount of time in your day. If you can include your child with ASD in some of that time by seating them beside you, perhaps with a snack of their own, they may not feel as left out. Depending on your child's developmental level, you could also have them assist with burping the baby or wiping the baby's face while you hold the baby. Be very cautious if you see any signs of aggression or unpredictable behaviour – safety is most important and you may need to have a safe separate area for your child with ASD while you are feeding or caring for the baby.

Spend frequent time with your child with ASD and label it out loud.

Making sure that you set aside frequent, even short times, with your child with ASD is very important. By saying out loud to your baby, “I am spending special time with Joey right now, so I am unavailable,” makes your child with ASD more aware that the time is just for him/her. Also talk out loud when you’re helping your older child do something, by saying to the newborn (they do not know what you’re talking about - this is for the benefit of your child with ASD), “I’m helping Joey right now, so I can’t nurse you until we come back from the bathroom.” That way, when you say it in reverse – telling your older child he/she has to wait while you help the newborn, it feels like equal treatment.

Schedule special time blocks with your child with ASD.



This time can be for activities with mom, dad or another person that your child enjoys being with. Setting up a visual schedule with pictures of time blocks in the day for the baby's feeding and sleeping will make the day more predictable for your child and help him/her know when his/her special time is coming up. Ask your ASD service provider for help to make these schedules. You can also use a calendar to show any doctors appointments, when visitors are coming and any other special events. Using a timer also may help your child understand the concept of time – for example “you can play by yourself for 10 minutes and then I will spend time with you for 10 minutes”. The ring of the timer will let you both know when it is time to change activities.

Reduce expectations of yourself and your child with ASD.

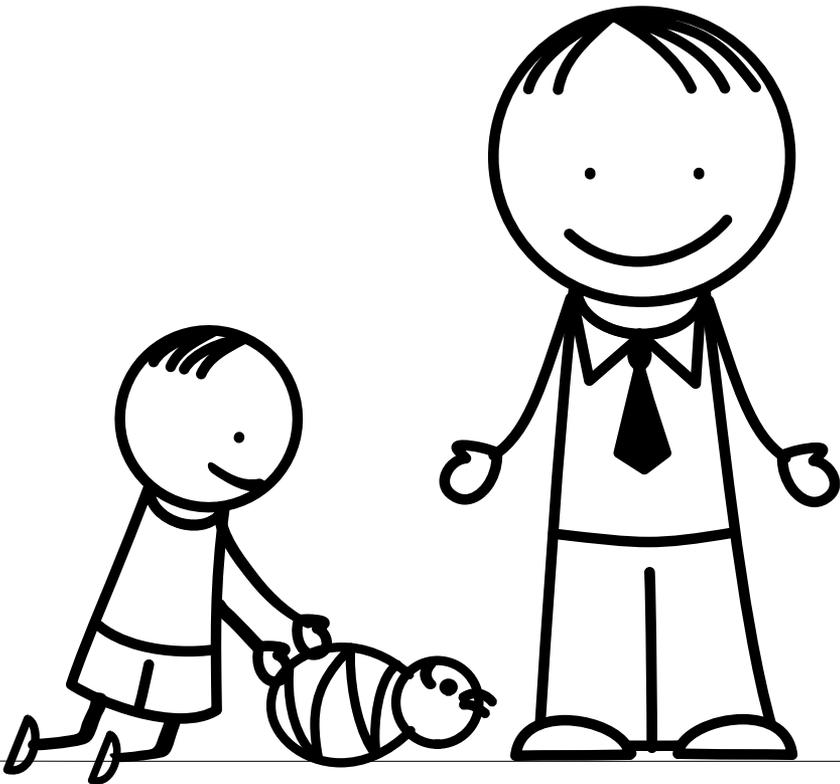


Do not start any new self-help routines (such as toilet training) during the first six months or more after the baby is born. Expect some more 'babyish' behaviours, as these are typical in all new siblings. Respect your child with ASD's sensory differences. If your baby has periods of fussy crying and your other child is sensitive to noise, provide headphones to drown out the noise. If smells are overwhelming, make sure to use a sealed garbage can for used diapers. Do not plan new tasks or projects to complete that you have had waiting for a time you would be home. Save your energy for providing care for your expanded family.

Teach your child with ASD what TO do, not focus on what NOT TO do.

Think about all the things that your other child can do with/for the baby – these might include getting you diapers/wipes, helping to soap up the baby's feet in the tub, gently patting the baby's back to soothe or burp him/her and talking quietly to the baby. Provide enough support to ensure he/she is successful and then provide praise and rewards (“After you help me change the baby, we can read your favourite book together”). Try using visuals or pictures of things your child can help with to make it clear what ‘helping behaviours’ are appropriate. If your child does not want to be involved in the baby's care, do not push it, but simply reward ‘baby

friendly' behaviour (quiet voice, gentle hands, patient waiting). Continue to read the books and stories about babies and what it feels like to be a big brother or sister.



Use friends, family or respite services to help you.

With a first baby, most mothers try to sleep when the baby sleeps in order to catch up with missed sleep at night. When you have an older child with ASD, sleeping while that child is awake is unsafe for both the child and the baby. Use your pre-arranged respite care services or try to schedule some time every day when someone can care for your older child while you catch up on the sleep you need or do something nice for yourself. Being well rested and taking care of your own needs will allow you to be better able to provide all the loving care your growing family requires.



