

Games That Address Sibling Rivalry



When a new baby arrives in a home, many older siblings have strong feelings about it. Children immediately notice that the parents' attention is elsewhere and feel sad and angry about it. Conversely, a younger child often feels less capable than his or her older sibling, which can wear on the child's feelings of self-worth. Children of similar ages (i.e. twins) can also have feelings that come up around sharing their parent(s) with another child, especially in blended families. Below are some simple games that can help older siblings feel special and proud of being older, and help younger siblings to gain a greater sense of power. These games also promote a close connection between parents and children. Many of the games described below are drawn from ideas presented in the book *Playful Parenting* by Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., a wonderful resource for parents.

I'm the Baby!

Let your older child act like a baby in whatever way she wants to. For example, if your child jumps into the stroller after the baby is out of it, act delighted to have such a wonderfully large baby! When your "baby" talks, exclaim about how astonished the neighbors will be when they see your amazing talking baby. If your child suddenly wants you to feed her, do so with enthusiasm. The idea is to give your child the kind of attention that you give her new sibling, which helps your older child feel special—and gives her a new appreciation for her own abilities!

Sorry, Baby, You'll Have to Wait!

A great trick to help your older sibling feel special is to give her priority attention at strategic times. For example, when the baby is not actually in need of your attention (i.e. he is sleeping, or being cared for by someone else), you can say, "Sorry, Baby, it's not your turn now. It's big sister's turn. You will have to wait." This way, your older child doesn't feel like the only one who has to wait! It also promotes more cooperation at times that the baby receives priority over the older sibling.

Born Again

Re-enact your older child's birth—as many times as he wants you to. You can do this by having your child crawl through your legs and pop out onto your chest, or you can do it with stuffed animals or dolls. Tell the story of the child's birth as you act it out. The main point is for you to act delighted when he comes out, and cuddle him up like you would a newborn.

Symbolic Play

Using stuffed animals or dolls, make a family that represents your family. Start by telling a story about how there was the parent(s) with one sweet child, and then a baby is born. Ask the child what happens next, and let her take over from there. If she talks about how she wants to hit the baby (or actually does), don't try to tell her that she's wrong—she's working through her feelings in a safe way. You can take the role of the baby, and if you really ham up your reactions, you'll get lots of laughing from your older child. This is your sign that she is successfully processing her feelings.

100 Kisses

Announce to your child that you are going to give her 100 kisses. Chase her around, gather her up and give her 10 or 20 kisses, then let her wriggle away again. Keep doing this until you've

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actually reached 100. Don't be surprised if your child begs for more than 100 kisses! Children love this game, as it makes them feel loved and wanted.

Tug-of-Love

One parent playfully pulls the child to her, saying, "I get Andrew now!" while the other one tugs the child back saying, "No! It's my turn! I haven't had enough Andrew yet!" This should bring on lots of laughter, a sign that the child's need for attention and love is being filled.

Power Reversal Games

You can use power reversal games to help your older child feel strong and powerful so that he doesn't have to use aggression to feel that way. Some ideas include pillow fights, wrestling, or follow the leader (see "Power Reversal Games" for more ideas). If you play these games regularly, your child's need to be aggressive will naturally diminish. You can also use these games in the moment when your child is being aggressive toward the baby or you. Pull him away from the situation and have him hit you with a pillow, and make a big show of falling down. These games also work well for younger siblings who always feel less competent than their older sibling.