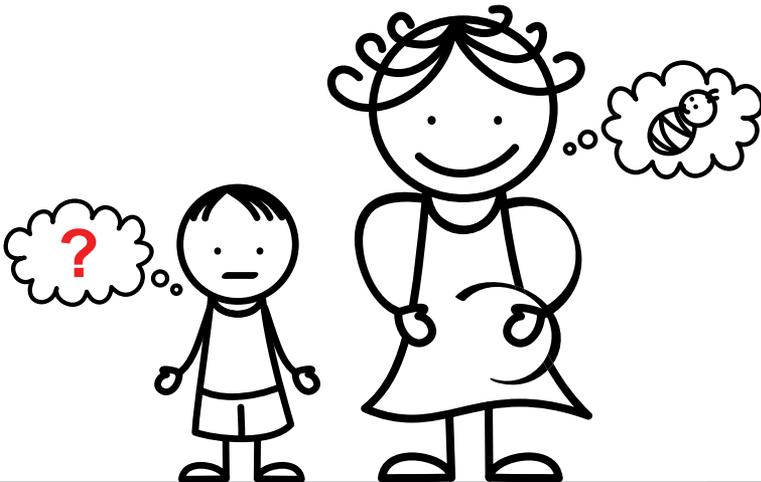


# Helping your Child with ASD Adjust to New Siblings

*Before the baby's birth*



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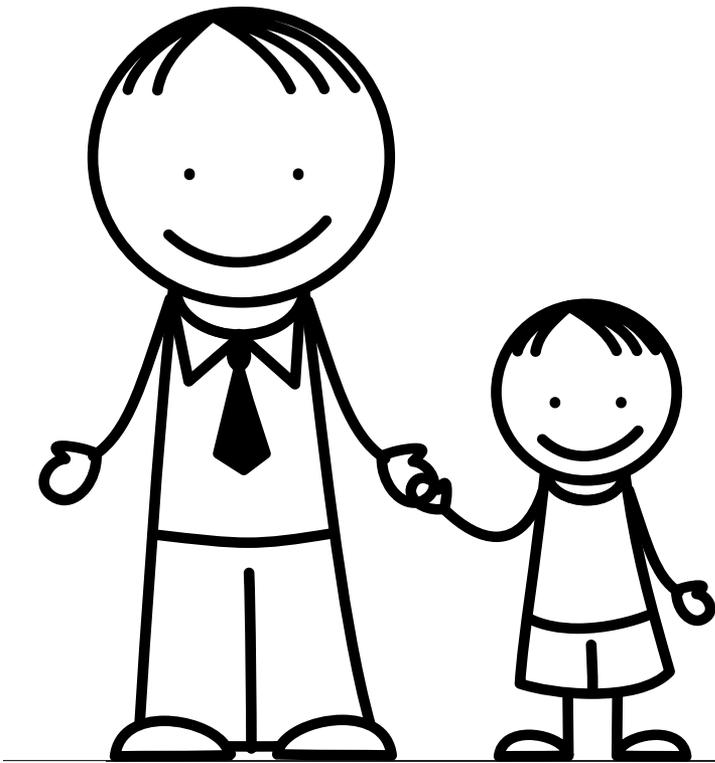
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# Before the baby's birth



Preparing to welcome a new baby into your home can be an exciting and happy experience, but it can also be a difficult time of adjustment for older siblings. When older siblings have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), they may need additional consideration, support and attention to assist them to cope with this dramatic change in their life.

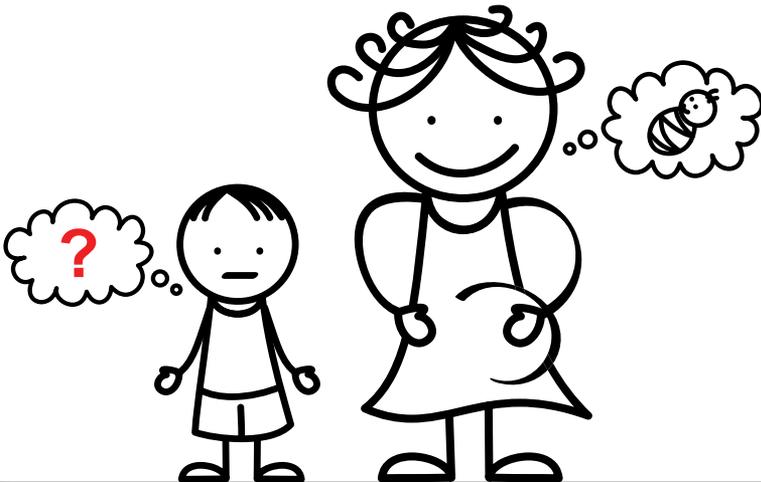
## Why might it be difficult for the child with ASD?

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Many siblings struggle with mixed feelings when they hear their mother is going to have another baby – excited about having someone new at home, scared that parents will have less time for them, and uncertain about how life at home will change. When a 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 they may not understand information told to them about their mother's pregnancy, 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.

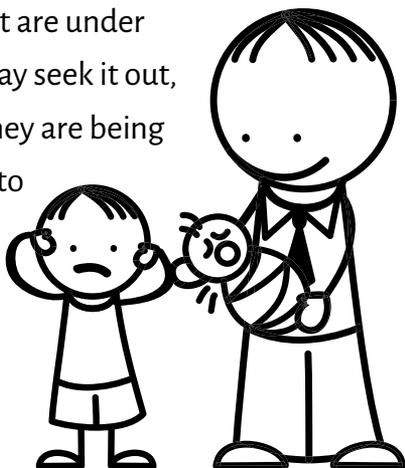


## Managing Change:

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 the hospital and then when she comes home and is busy with the baby. These are just a few of the potential changes that may be very upsetting to your child with ASD.

# 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 they often have smelly diapers. The baby may reach out and grab hair or feel heavy when placed in a child's arms or lap. These sounds, smells and physical sensations may be overwhelming to a child with ASD. Children with ASD that are under sensitive to sensory input may seek it out, and may not realize when they are being rough when they are trying to touch, hold or even smell the baby.



**What can  
I do to prepare  
my child with  
ASD for a new  
sibling?**

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# Start talking about your pregnancy early so your child has time to adapt to the idea before the new baby arrives.

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When you start to show you are pregnant, you can begin to explain why your body is changing and that a baby is growing in your stomach. Use clear language (the baby is growing in my uterus) as other common words can cause confusion (tummy is where food goes). Make family drawings that show your family growing to include a new baby. Explain that you will be going to the hospital when the baby is ready to be born, and that a doctor will help you get the baby out safely.

## Show family photos to show that families grow and change with the addition of each child.

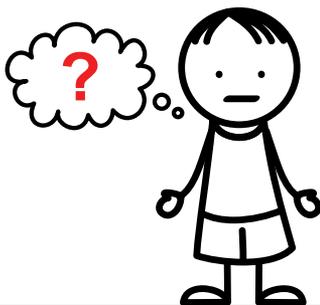
Show your child pictures of him/her as a baby and talk about his/her growth and changes. Create a story/book together about your growing family (see example in this kit- "I am Going to be a Big Brother/Sister"). Read this story/book frequently to your child as it may take time for him/her to understand and to think of questions or worries.





## Anticipate issues and questions that your child may not be able to verbalize, and provide simple answers to them.

Use pictures and simple story books to explain how the baby is growing inside of you, how the baby will be born, and how life at home will be once the baby is born (see list of books/resources in this kit). You can make your own stories with pictures or photos ('social narratives') that explain changes that will happen



in your family once the baby is born. Make sure the material you use is at the right level for your child, as some children with ASD learn better with real photos rather than cartoons or drawings. If you are unsure how your child will respond to the cries of a baby, play audio of a newborn crying. Your child's response to this will help you plan for how your child will respond to the loud sounds and may also help to desensitize your child to a sound that soon will be inevitable in your home. Introducing information and watching your child's response early in your pregnancy will provide you time to make the necessary environmental changes (e.g. purchasing headphones, making visuals etc.) to help your child cope with the changes. It can be very difficult tending to a newborn and trying to resolve any behaviour issues in the same moment. Being prepared for your child's response and having the supports in place may minimize the stress of caring for your new born while dealing with potential behavioural concerns.

## Watch television shows/videos together that have stories about new babies.

Some excellent shows that depict child birth and new babies are Caillou, Dora the Explorer and Arthur. Watching these shows, probably multiple times, can promote discussions on common feelings that children may experience upon the birth of a new baby in the family.

# Introduce the idea of ‘babies’ to your child.

17



Visit other babies and point out other babies when out in the community. Talk about what the babies are doing (e.g., crying, sleeping, breast feeding) and why they might be doing that. If your child is able to understand and do pretend play, role play caring for a baby with a life size doll. To assist your child with adjusting to sharing your attention, you could carry the doll around, pretend to feed it and change its diaper. If your child gets used to seeing you attending to someone other than him/her, it may be less of a shock when their real life sibling arrives. Be careful that your child understands the difference between a doll (an inanimate object) and a baby (who has feelings and can easily be injured).

## Plan for divided attention and help your child get to know alternative care givers.

Make your child's social world bigger before the baby is born by arranging visits with grandparents or other family members who may help out while you are in hospital and after the baby arrives. Plan a routine for special time with dad or other close adults who will be available after the baby's birth to help out with your child. You may need to plan for getting 'respite care' for your child with ASD as you may need some time without trying to meet the needs of both an infant and your other child. Speak with your ASD service provider, or contact

[www.respiteservices.com](http://www.respiteservices.com) to make arrangements well before the birth of your baby. Begin having your child attend the respite program at least two months before your baby is born to minimize changes in routine after the baby is born. It may take two months to gradually increase time in respite care to a full weekend.



## Make major changes early and before the baby is born.

You may need to move your child to another bedroom or to a new bed. Make this move a positive experience and do it well before the baby arrives. You may need to increase time spent at day care or change a school routine (e.g., staying at school for lunch). Speak with the contact person at these programs to arrange for making these changes at least two months prior to the baby's birth. Also plan to teach major self help skills (e.g., toilet training, dressing self) well before the baby is born when you have more time and also to prevent your child from feeling like you expect more because you are too busy with the baby.

# Teach things you want your child to know about being an older sibling.

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You may need to teach and model the meaning of words like 'gentle' and 'fragile'. Ensure your child knows and complies with safety words like 'stop'. Teach these behaviors by using lots of praise and other meaningful rewards for behaviours you want to see. You may need to practice what these behaviours look like in various situations and with various people giving those instructions. Have your child practice things he/she may want to help you with that would be safe with the baby (e.g., getting diapers and wipes, turning on a music box, folding blankets and baby clothes, etc.).

## Anticipate your needs for additional support services.



If your child has difficulty with aggressive or unpredictable behaviour, seek help well in advance. There are often wait lists for services and any form of treatment may take time to have impact on your family's functioning. Speak to your ASD service provider, school social worker or family doctor for assistance in arranging for these services.

# Get important tasks done early.



These tasks may include school registration, making doctor and dentist appointments, and compiling paperwork for important meetings. Shop early for equipment you may need such as safety gates to block access to the baby and other necessities. Plan early for emergencies such as premature labour/delivery, unexpected hospital admissions or health problems that limit your ability to care for your child.

