

Everyday learning about



brothers & sisters

Gerrie Mackey

Vol.3
Number 2

About the author

Gerrie Mackey was born and raised in Central Africa and came to Australia at age 18, then spent three years at teacher's college. Her first published writing venture was for a short story competition, then she moved on to writing a children's book (unpublished) and ended up writing features and articles about life, health, family, books and travelling.

She is now a parent of two daughters who teaches part-time (with young children who have learning disabilities) and writes part-time, and finds one provides inspiration for the other. Gerrie writes freelance articles for newspapers and magazines on education, travel and parenting. She also occasionally teaches life writing classes, and is constantly amazed at the wonderful stories everyday people have to tell. www.gerriemackey.com

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About Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia Inc., formerly known as the Australian Early Childhood Association, was established in 1938. Early Childhood Australia works with Government, early childhood professionals, parents, other carers of young children, and various lobby groups to secure the best range of options and outcomes for children as they grow and develop.

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ISBN 0-9751935-8-9
ISSN 1448-045X
Printed by Goanna Print, Canberra

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The *Everyday learning* series has been developed to focus attention on the everyday ways in which children can be supported in their growth and development. It is for all those who are involved in children's development and learning, including early childhood professionals in all children's services, parents, grandparents and others with an ongoing responsibility for young children.

The first years of life are the foundation for all later growth, development and learning.

- Early experiences set the pattern for all later learning.
- Early experiences and relationships affect how children feel about themselves, how they get on with other people and how they join in and enjoy life.
- Every experience has an impact. Babies and young children are learning all the time, regardless of whether we think we are 'teaching' them.

Research has shown that a strong foundation in these years starts children on the pathway to:

- being able to relate confidently and effectively with others;
- mental and emotional health; and
- making the most of each child's abilities in education.

Babies and young children are learning all the time.

This research also shows us what kinds of experiences and relationships babies and young children need, to get the best start for living and learning.

What matters is how they are learning and what they are learning. Learning takes place in relationships. If the earliest relationships are warm and loving, babies and young children have the best chance to make the most of the opportunities in their worlds.

To learn best they need parents and carers (their first teachers) who:

- are warm and caring;
- know each baby or child very well and appreciate what is special about them;
- take time to understand the child's messages (cues) and to respond to them with encouragement, praise, comfort, independence and rest as needed; and
- are able to see, share and celebrate the big and small joys and achievements of the children in their care.

There is no set list of things to teach babies and young children.

Living is learning and children learn through living. These books are a guide to how young children learn and how best to help them at the different stages of early childhood. All children and babies have their own abilities and interests.

Adults watch and listen and provide opportunities and support to build on each child's strengths. Babies and children also come from family and cultural backgrounds that are part of the way they are and need to be included in their experiences.



Introduction

In recent times, families have changed completely; there are now many different kinds of family. There are families with two parents and often two children, single parent families, blended families where boys and girls have stepbrothers and stepsisters, and families with adopted and fostered children.

Australia has people from many different cultures, who often have extended families: where grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins all live as one family. Children in these families are brought up with cousins who may be just like brothers and sisters.

Why are families important?

No matter how a family develops, this is commonly the first place where children learn about life. Successes, failures, hopes, dreams and conflicts all happen in families. Children growing up together have to share belongings, space and the attention of parents and/or carers.

The family in which a child grows up will have a big influence on how that child will cope in the wider world.

Children in the same family have to learn to:

- communicate with each other;
- respect the property of their siblings; and
- understand the point of view of their brothers and sisters.

It is natural that there is often tension and argument, as well as love and affection, between people who live together so closely. Brothers and sisters, and stepbrothers and stepsisters, can be good friends as well as great rivals, and they teach each other important lessons that are needed in the wider world.

There are many factors that influence a child's development and relationship with brothers and sisters.





Position

The position in the family gives a child her own special experiences of brothers and sisters. Parents' ideas about child-rearing change with their second child. With their first child most parents have very high expectations of their own skills and also of the development of their child. Parents usually become more realistic and flexible as they have more children, and this affects how a child is brought up and how she gets along with her brothers and sisters.

The older child often learns to become more independent when there is a new baby in the family. On the other hand, the younger one in the family may be looked after by both parents and older brothers and sisters for a long time. A child in the middle of the family has a unique position. This child may be a toddler when there is an older child starting school and a baby younger than her. She often does not get the same amount of attention as her siblings, but she does have the advantage of brothers and sisters as playmates and companions as she is growing up.

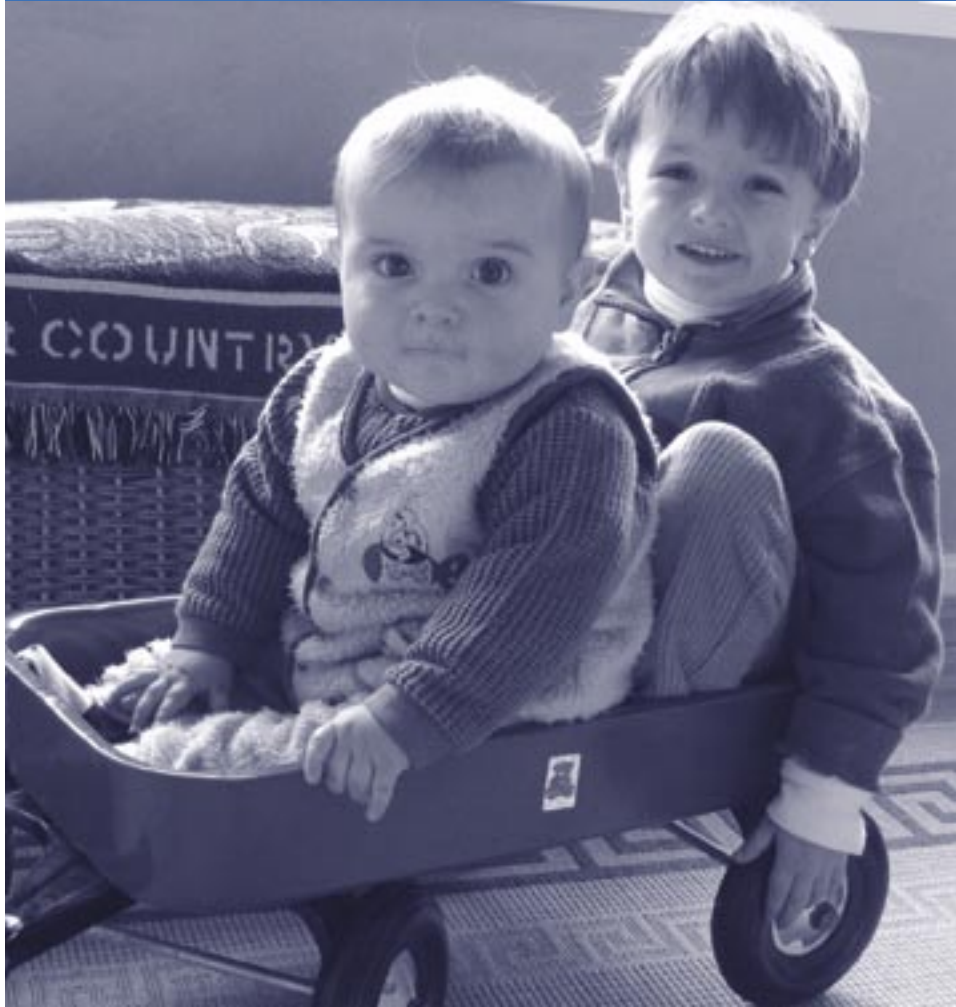
Sex of the child

The sex of the siblings will make a difference to how the children in a family react to each other. Two boys in a family will be different from two girls, or a boy and a girl. Research shows that two children of the same sex are more likely to compete with one another than are two children of the opposite sex. However, children of the same sex may be closer, and have the same interests as they are growing up.

Space between siblings

The space between siblings affects the amount of time a child gets from parents. A child who has a sibling 18 months younger than her will have to share the time and attention of parents almost from birth. A child who is three years older than a sibling has already had attention and time from parents, and is now starting to lead a life outside of the family, attending preschool and making friends.

Despite the difficulties of introducing a new child into the family, brothers and sisters give each other companionship and friendship during childhood, and often are lifelong friends and companions.





Toddlers and a new baby in the family

What to do ... before the baby arrives in a family

A new baby brings change to every member of the family. Parents have to adjust to the demands of a tiny baby, while taking care of and considering other children in the family.

A child will find it easier to accept a new baby if she is prepared for the new event in her life.

- A young child does not have the same understanding of time as an adult does. Tell her about the coming baby close to the event, so that she does not have too much time to wait.
- Once she knows about the coming baby, involve her in the preparations. Take her with you for your regular checkups with your doctor, and discuss how the baby is growing and will soon be born.
- Allow her to help pick some items of baby's clothes or furniture. Perhaps give her a choice of items. For example: *'Shall we buy the baby a yellow blanket or a green one?'*
- Do not suggest that her most important possessions be given to the baby; for example, the cot she has been sleeping in most of her life. If you want to use her cot for the new baby, make sure she has changed over to a bed some time before the baby is due.
- If you make changes to her room, do this well before the new baby is born. Make the changes special for her, rather than focusing on the baby.

- Toilet-training a toddler needs time and effort, and it is best to do this before a new baby comes or once the new baby has completely settled into the family routines. If you try to train the toddler when the new baby arrives she will wonder why, and perhaps resent that she is different from the baby and no longer using nappies.
- Talk to your child about the fact that you will be away from home and in hospital for a few days when the baby is born.
- A very young child will find it easier to cope with her mother being in hospital if she can stay in her own home and be minded by those she knows best—her father, her grandparents, or other relatives and friends.
- If she is being cared for in another home, give her plenty of time to get used to the idea. Perhaps have a trial run of sleeping over, or at least visiting the house and friends a few times before the event.
- A child learns 'give and take' by her parents' example. If she is allowed to choose a present for the baby, and has a small present given to her from the baby when he arrives, she learns that this is a two-way process.





When Mum is in hospital

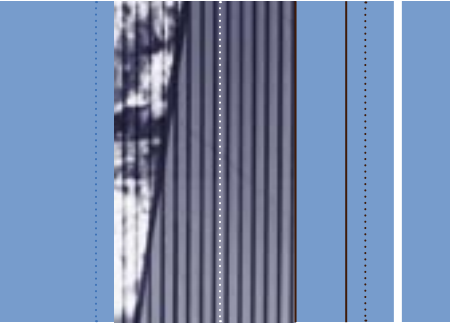
- Some children enjoy having a doll to look after, 'just like Mum'. Others may like to do a chore, such as feeding the dog, while Mum is away.
- A young child needs to visit his mother regularly in hospital, despite the fact that he may be upset when it is time to go.
- When a toddler or preschooler is visiting the hospital it helps if he has time with his mother to talk about things that are important to him and what he has done in his day, rather than all the attention being focused on the baby.
- During these hospital visits Mum needs to make time to cuddle the older child as well as the baby.

When the second baby comes home

- Expect some change in behaviour from a toddler when you bring the new baby home.
- The toddler may start to behave like a baby, asking for help more than she did before, talking in a baby voice, wanting to have the same food as the baby.
- Give the toddler support and reassurance at this time to help the phase pass quickly. Notice when she is doing something good, and praise her for it.
- Try and make a time for your toddler every day. This can be a special time just for the two of you, and show her that you enjoy this time. Your toddler has been used to having her parents to herself, and it takes some adjusting to share the attention with a new baby.



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- Read books about new babies coming into the family, so that your toddler learns that this event happens in most families, and that everyone feels happy, sad and tired sometimes. (Some suggested titles are listed at the back of this book.)
- Feeding the baby can be a stressful time for toddlers. Try to arrange special activities for your toddler, such as a DVD to watch or a special game she can play by herself.
- A toddler may enjoy having a doll, teddy or favourite toys to feed, change and look after at the times you are attending to the baby.
- If the toddler has a tantrum it is important that they understand why they are doing it: *'I know you are cross because you want me to play with you and I have to bath the baby. We will play a game as soon as I have settled the baby.'*
- It is important that a toddler understand that the baby should not be hit or hurt in any way. Make it clear that, no matter how angry the child is, hurting the baby is not allowed.
- Ask your toddler to help you bath and care for the baby. This way she learns to be gentle with the baby, and feels needed by you and the baby.

Ways to help the toddler accept a new baby

- Include him in the care of the baby. There are plenty of small jobs a toddler can do, from passing the nappies to helping bath the baby. When the baby cries he can sing or softly talk to the baby.
- Prepare a book for each new child in the family. The book is about them as babies—with photos, information and sayings, and the funny and cute things they have done. Perhaps write a poem or story about each child to show why they are so special as babies, and as people growing up. This book can be read and re-read to a preschooler or toddler while the family is looking after the new baby. This reminds the older child that he was also a baby, and had all the same needs at that age.
- Show your toddler ultrasounds and a video or photographs of himself as a baby. Talk to him about the things he did as a baby, and remind him that he is special too and that he did some of the same things as the new baby.
- Read books about babies and brothers and sisters to him. Talk to him about the fact that there are siblings in most families.
- Feeding a baby can be a difficult time for a toddler. If possible, allow him to snuggle up close at these times, so that he can feel warm and protected too.
- If your toddler wants to hold the baby, sit him up securely with the baby for a short while, rather than refusing to let him do it.
- Make a time to do something special with the toddler of the family. He has to share his time with a new baby, and it is important for him to have some of his own time with you well.



- Give him some 'grown-up' time, perhaps staying up a little later than the baby, or some time when he can play a special game or watch his favourite DVD with you.
- Although it is hard to juggle a baby with toddler activities, try not to change your toddler's routines too much. He will be reassured if he knows family routines are not totally altered; for example his swimming lessons can continue, and visits to friends will still happen.
- Visit friends who have children the same age as yours, and who are going through the same daily routines of bathing, feeding and dressing.
- Talk to your toddler about the fact that a baby won't be a companion straight away, but will grow into a friend.
- Ask relatives and friends to give positive attention to him. Often a baby is more appealing than a toddler, but the toddler is much more aware than a baby of his surroundings and people.
- While the baby is asleep, spend some time reading and listening to music with your toddler. Reading books with a toddler is a warm, safe experience for him.
- If the baby is crying a great deal, especially at night, tell your toddler that this sometimes happens with newborn babies, and it makes everyone in the family tired. Reassure him that this happens with all babies, and it won't last forever.
- Point out when the baby is like your toddler, perhaps when the baby smiles or laughs.

Things to do in difficult situations

- Make sure the baby is handled gently. Don't allow hugging too tight and kissing too hard. It is quite natural for the toddler to have mixed feelings about the baby, and this will pass. In the meantime, the baby needs to be protected too.
- If your toddler is aggressive towards the baby, move her away from the baby straight away, but do not hurt or humiliate her. Explain that it is never okay to hurt a baby, and give her time away from the baby but with you.
- Make sure the toddler and baby are safe when they are together. Don't leave the toddler in charge of a stroller, or put the baby down near her sharp or small toys.
- As the baby grows, give the toddler some special space for her toys and books, so that they will not be damaged by the baby.
- Don't expect the toddler to share all her belongings. As the baby grows, it is also important that the toddler has special things that belong to her and they are out of the baby's reach.

Although the early days for a baby and an older brother or sister can be difficult, it will not be long before the two children will be able to play together and have fun. A parent who is positive, understanding and fair to both baby and toddler will help them to become companions and friends.

Preschoolers

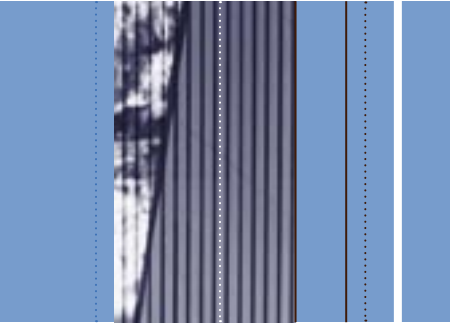
A preschool child is developing his own unique personality, with clear likes and dislikes and interests in the world. He may enjoy having a younger brother or sister to play with some of the time, but he also needs some space of his own. He is interested in exploring the world, and may want to do this without his brother or sister occasionally. The different ages, needs and personalities of children in a family will create tensions at times, as parents get used to having a bigger family. Arguments and fights between brothers and sisters are normal in a family, and are one of the ways children learn to respect other people's feelings and belongings.

Preschool children and their brothers and sisters

- Encourage children to show kindness and affection to each other. Allow children to work together on a project they can both do successfully. For example, building different parts of a cubby house.
- Let children choose or make presents for each other for Christmas and birthdays and other special occasions.
- Talk to your preschooler about her feelings. It is natural for a child to have some feelings of anger, jealousy or resentment toward a sibling occasionally. Children need to be able to express their feelings with words—'*Stop taking my toys! I'm cross*'—but they also need to understand that they may not hurt another child physically.







- While it is important for children to learn to share, each child needs some space and toys of their own. This makes each child feel valued and important. In some cultural groups, for example in Indigenous cultures, shared ownership is the norm so sharing space and possessions is taken more for granted.
- A preschooler is interested in specific toys and books. Make sure the younger members of the family do not break or destroy her special toys and books.
- Look out for the good things your child is doing, rather than comparing her to her brother or sister. Comment when you see positive behaviour between a toddler and preschooler: *'You played well together today.'* *'Thank you for helping your sister on the stairs.'*
- When you talk to your child about behaviour, try not to make comparisons such as *'I wish you would be as quiet as your sister'*.
- All children in the family need to be safe, but sometimes a preschooler can be overprotective and try to organise or boss younger siblings. Be careful not to let the older child always take control.
- Show your preschooler that she can solve her own problems with siblings. For example, if she is being bothered by the baby: *'How about taking your truck and going onto the deck, away from the baby?'*
- Let your preschooler have something special now and then, to show that she is older, for example a special craft box or helping with the cooking.

- Have clear rules for the preschooler to follow. This does not mean the siblings will not have disagreements, but it is easier to solve the problem if children in the family know the rules, for example each child in the family may have a special toy, and other children in the family need to ask permission before using or taking the toy.
- Give each child individual attention. An older child will be very aware of the fact that she does not get the attention she did before the new baby was born. Try to even this out by giving the preschooler time when the baby is asleep or your partner can look after the baby. When you spend time with the older child, try not to talk about the baby all the time!
- Try to keep the preschooler's routines regular. If her routine is going to playgroup or preschool, don't allow her to miss out because the baby is asleep. It is important that the preschooler knows that her activities are also important.





Sibling rivalry

Everyone who has brothers and sisters probably remembers fighting with them at some time. But most parents cannot automatically understand the fights and rivalries of their children.

When brothers and sisters fight, parents often feel as if they have failed in their role. However, children often learn to change and adapt to their siblings through fights, and it is a natural part of living as a family.

- The amount of fighting among siblings may depend on the number of children in the family and their spacing, sex and personality.
- Living with brothers and sisters helps children to learn about attitudes and skills they will need to be successful with people in the wider world, and it will help them to have caring relationships.
- Instead of always thinking about who is right and who is wrong, it is important for children to understand that all people are different and that listening and understanding is an important part of getting along with others.
- It helps if you do not try to pretend that the child is not angry, but instead show him that you understand he is angry, and there are ways of solving the problem. *'You're cranky because he is taking your toys. How about we give him some toys to play with in the other room?'* This way the preschooler learns that he can solve his problems by doing something different.
- Once a parent has shown a child that there are ways of solving a problem, give the child the chance to solve his problem later.
- Children often feel very competitive towards their siblings, but this is made much worse if parents compare the siblings.

- Parents should avoid making comparisons. Say *'How about packing up your toys now?'* rather than *'Don't leave your toys around like the baby.'*
- Some children get upset when another child in the family is praised. They take praise for the other child as a 'put-down' to themselves. Help your child by reminding him of something he is good at.
- Children cannot always be treated in exactly the same way in a family, but it is possible to show a child that they are important, and unique in the family: *'No one could ever take your place in the family.'*
- Parents can often get caught in the child's argument for more time or attention! *'She has more grapes than me!'*—rather than getting involved in the argument, be matter of fact, and move on: *'Do you want a few grapes or a big bunch?'*
- Children in families often learn to play roles: 'the bossy one', 'the passive one'. A child's role in the family is derived from three different areas: the parents, other siblings, and the child himself.
- Parents can quite unconsciously put a child in a role. Saying *'Oh, you are always so mean to your brother'* can lead the child to thinking that he is always mean. It is better for a parent to concentrate on the child's action: *'Your brother wants his ball back.'* 'If you give him some of the blocks you can both build your own bridge.'
- It is easy for children to fit into the 'oldest, middle, youngest' roles. Even toddlers can do some jobs around the house with guidance. Give the younger child a chance to do a job usually done by the older child, for example helping put out the plates for a meal.



Siblings with disabilities

A child with disabilities changes life for the whole family, including brothers and sisters.

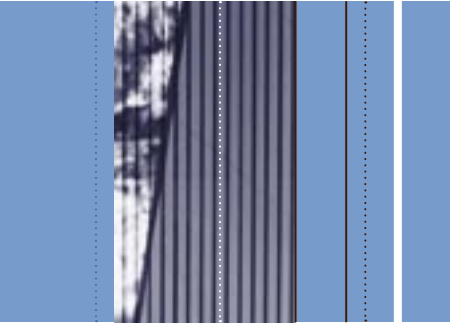
Young children who have a disabled brother or sister have to adapt to a different lifestyle with parents who are extra busy and preoccupied. The child will react to this according to how the parents are reacting and the support the family receives in dealing with the situation.

A child will often develop a very caring relationship with a disabled sibling, and the whole experience of the need to care for a disabled member of the family may help children grow into understanding and thoughtful adults.

However, a toddler or preschooler may have some confused feelings and thoughts about her disabled sibling.

- She may be worried by her parents' behaviour, especially if her parents are arguing or grieving over the situation.
- She may have the same feelings of loss and sadness, and will sense it in her parents.
- She may be afraid that she will be affected by the same disability.
- She may try to fit in with or take on the role of caring for everyone, at the expense of playing and making friends of her own age.
- She may miss out on time and activities with parents while they are dealing with the disabled child.
- She may fight with other siblings more than usual because it is not possible to fight with a disabled sibling.
- She may change in her behaviour, becoming withdrawn or loud and attention-seeking.





Things to do to help brothers and sisters cope with a disabled sibling

- Parents with a disabled child are very busy. Grandparents, relatives and friends are very important and special in every family, but especially in a family learning to cope with a disabled child. These people can step in and help if needed during emergencies and provide extra time for the toddler in the family.
- Give your toddler or preschooler time to play and have activities that are especially for him.
- Make sure one parent goes with him to sport, friends, gym etc. so that he regularly has one parent to himself.
- Talk to him about his sibling's disability. Allow him to talk about his feelings about his sibling, even if he is negative and angry. If he talks about it, he is more likely to accept the situation and move on.
- Encourage him to ask questions, and give answers straight away.
- Try to find special time for him with at least one parent.

When to seek help

It is impossible to live closely as a family and not have moments of tension and conflict. However, if the difficult times continue, and the baby or toddler is not accepted by her siblings, then it is possible to seek help. A clinic sister or doctor can put you in touch with someone who specialises in helping with family problems. Talking to a trained person outside the family can often help parents to understand their feelings and children to get some added support to deal with the situation.

It is also helpful to talk to other parents in playgroups or parent support groups. These parents usually have children the same age as yours, and are often experiencing the same situations. This gives a family ongoing support in dealing with the ups and downs of brothers and sisters learning to get along.

Resources

Faber, A., & Mazlish, E. (1998). *Siblings without rivalry*. US: Perennial Currents.

Webber, R. (1989). *Living in a stepfamily*. Hawthorn, Vic: ACER.

Grose, M. (2003). *Why first-borns rule the world and last-borns want to change it*. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House.

Child and Youth Health: Parenting SA: www.parenting.sa.gov.au *Second baby and sibling rivalry*.

ParentLink Guides: *Children with a disability: Brothers and sisters*. www.parentlink.com.au

Books to read to children

Andreae, G., & Cabban, V. (2001). *There's a house inside my Mummy*. UK: Orchard House.

Blume, J. (1984). *The pain and the great one*. NY: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Corey, D. (1992). *Will there be a lap for me to sit on?* Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman.

Hughes, S. (1986). *The Trouble with Jack*. UK: Transworld Publishing.

Moonah, K. (2004). *Franklin forgives*. Canada: Scholastic.

Murkoff, H. (2000). *What to expect when the new baby comes home*. NY: Harper Collins.

The *Everyday learning series* has been developed to focus attention on the everyday ways in which children can be supported in their growth and development. It is for all those who are involved in children's development and learning, including early childhood professionals in all children's services, parents, grandparents and others with an ongoing responsibility for young children.



The earliest and most important lessons – about communication, cooperation and understanding – develop from family relationships. The rough and tumble of daily life encourages brothers and sisters to learn such lessons, which last a lifetime.

Everyday learning about brothers and sisters gives helpful advice to parents about how to make the addition of a new baby to the family a positive experience for toddlers and preschoolers. The book offers a range of strategies: preparing for the new arrival; balancing the needs of all children; and dealing with difficult situations which can arise, such as sibling rivalry or a sibling with a disability. Covering all types of families, this book will be a valuable resource for all parents and carers.

ISBN 0-9751935-8-9



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