

Additions to the Family: Help Young Children Prepare



Families add new members in several ways: the birth of a baby, adoption, fostering, or welcoming relatives who need a place to stay. Such situations will affect children already in the family, and they may need support to adjust. These suggestions can be helpful when someone new joins the household.

Decide when to tell your child about the new addition

- Consider how much lead time your child usually needs to feel ready for changes. Do they get anxious about “when it’s going to happen” if they have more than a few days’ notice?
- If there is no warning, such as when relatives are displaced by a disaster, let the child know, “This might not be easy. We’ll all just do the best we can to make it work.”
- Be sure to set aside enough time for your child to ask questions or express their feelings.

Briefly describe what will happen

- Share clear, basic information. Who is the new arrival? How long will they stay? “Tomorrow the social worker will bring a child for us to foster for several days.” “Great-Gram will stay here until her leg heals.”
- Be honest with your child about changes that directly affect them. “We’ll add another bed to your bedroom, but you’ll sleep in your same bed.”
- Adding a new family member can feel chaotic, so be clear with your child about what will remain consistent. “Muffin will still need you to feed her every day.”
- Remember to include some positives. “You’ve wanted a sibling for so long, and now it’s happening.” “Great-Gram says she’ll bring her Legos.”

Include children in welcoming the new arrival

- Make some suggestions, keeping in mind that your child may like being trusted with “grown-up” tasks. “Would you like to help put the baby’s chair together?”
- Encourage your child to make suggestions. “Your idea for a card that says, ‘Welcome to Our House’ sounds very friendly.”

Keep family communication open

- Remember that in times of change, everyone needs attention and assurance that they are loved. Prioritize time for pleasant interaction with your young child, even if it must be brief.
- Talk to your child individually about the changes. What do they think is going well? What has been hard? Do they have questions or suggestions?
- Consider having regular family meetings where everyone, including new members, can talk about how things are going.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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