

Through a Child's Eyes

Written by Susan Bartell, PsyD

Tuesday, 01 December 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Thursday, 31 October 2013 10:31

It's a very important moment in the life of your family: You're adding a new member! In growing families, a new son or daughter is often also a new brother or sister. Many families face the question: Should my child be present to greet her new sibling on arrival?

Different people will have very different reactions to this idea. Some will think it's terrific—a really wonderful shared experience for parents and child, not to mention a powerful bonding moment for the child and her new sibling. Other people will be shocked that a parent would even consider exposing a child to what they perceive as a traumatic experience. One mom told me that she didn't think she would be able to concentrate and that she might even be embarrassed for her daughter to see her in labor and giving birth. Still others will be on the fence, unsure of which is the right decision for their family. It's important to examine the pros and cons of this issue in order to decide which choice is right for you. And if you do decide to have your child present at the birth of your next baby, we have some suggestions about how to make the experience as positive as possible.



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Experts Don't Agree
The experts who favor having a child present at a birth say that it can be a powerful and positive experience that contributes to a feeling of family closeness. Since parents include the child in many phases of the pregnancy as it develops, having the sibling at the birth is an extension and natural conclusion of this. Many midwives, who tend to be more accepting of children at births than traditional obstetricians, report that most children are thrilled to be there, and that they bond with their new sister or brother immediately. Other supporters suggest that the child's presence at the birth might reduce sibling rivalry later on.

Even among the supporters, however, there is disagreement regarding the ideal age at which children can benefit from the experience. Many feel that a child must be adequately prepared before attending

a labor and delivery, and must be able to understand verbal explanations quite well. Among these experts there is a general consensus that about three years old is the youngest age that a child can adequately comprehend what is being explained, and ask questions, if necessary.

Other proponents feel that, depending upon the child and the birth, a child of any age should be able to attend. "The really young ones seemed almost oblivious, as long as they were being held by a trusted adult—usually a best friend of Mom, or a grandma," says a seasoned midwife, who has attended dozens of births at which siblings of various ages were present. "They haven't learned as much fear yet, in my opinion."

On the other hand, some people believe it can be too difficult for a child of any age to view his mother in labor and giving birth. Their concern is that the sight of blood, coupled with seeing their mother in pain, can be very traumatic for a child, and that witnessing the actual birth could be overwhelming. Furthermore, they suggest that the child's presence might be distracting or difficult for the mother, who already has a large enough burden in laboring and giving birth. Some obstetricians worry that the child will get in the way. Others warn that you never know when a crisis might arise during labor and delivery, which you probably won't want your child to observe.

Temperament and Age
Regardless of what the experts say, you know your child best. Use your good sense to make the final decision. You might have a very sensitive child who gets scared easily or has nightmares, and choose not to have her at a birth. What's more, you can't assume that an older child will not be scared. There are



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Okay, I've decided. Now what?

Here are some things you should do to make the experience positive for you and your child:

Ask your child if he wants to attend. Never force or coerce a reluctant child or teenager, and make it clear that he can change his mind at any time. Also, tell him that he can leave at any time during the labor or delivery if he is uncomfortable or scared, and you will not be at all hurt or upset.

Prepare your child for the birth by describing in a calm and matter-of-fact way what she should expect to see. Use age-appropriate language and don't spare the details. Children need a realistic idea of the pain and blood they may witness. Explain that Mom's body makes a lot of extra blood for the birth and that it is supposed to come out. They also need to know that the birth will probably take a long time (as long as three TV shows or more), and that the baby may be blue and cry a lot when it is born.

Get at least one video that shows childbirth and encourage your child to watch it as often as possible before the actual day. (Try *Spiritual Midwifery*, which can be ordered online through farmcatalog.com.) A book with graphic pictures is also very useful—

Giving Birth
and

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A Child is Born

are both recommended by parents who've had their children at a birth.

Explain that having a baby is very, very hard work, and that sometimes it helps to make “really big work noises” and “hard, hard work faces.” It's a good idea to encourage your child to practice making funny noises and faces with you, focusing on exerting effort.

Ask an adult with whom your child is comfortable to be responsible for him throughout the entire process. This person should not be the father or anyone else directly involved in the labor and delivery. This adult and your child should both know that if the child cries, becomes scared or asks to leave, he should be taken out immediately. Your child should be told in advance who will be in charge of him. Older children and teenagers also need the support of an adult, but of course they may not need to be taken care of in quite the same way.

If your child is very young (though even with some older children), you might want to consider having her at the delivery only. It can be hard for a young child to endure a long wait and see her mother in labor, but witnessing the birth can still be exciting.

If the child will attend the labor and delivery, pack some snacks, drinks, toys and books. It's also a good idea to arrange a place to sleep.

Remember, this is a big decision. You should always give yourself the option to change your mind, even at the last minute or during labor.

Arrange to have your child interact with the baby as soon as possible after the birth. This will help forge the initial bond between your older child and her new sibling.

If you are still really unsure how your child will respond to the experience, consider this: If you allow her to witness the labor and delivery, she might be scared by it, it's possible that she will continue to feel upset long after the birth. Obviously, this would be stressful for her, for you, and for her relationship with the baby.

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Remember, you can't undo this once it's been done. So if you really think your child won't respond well, go with your gut feeling and don't do it. You can always videotape the birth and let her watch it afterward when there is time to stop and process it as you go along. But if you feel it would be a wonderful experience for your family, be open and flexible. Most of all, listen to your child.



About the Author:

Dr. Susan Bartell is America's No. 1 family psychologist. She has been helping parents and kids lead happier and healthier lives for nearly twenty years. Dr. Susan's latest book is Dr. Susan's Fit and Fun Family Action Plan. You can learn more about her at drsusanbartell.com.

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