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Don't neglect first child

by valerie davies

When a family is getting ready for a second child, the work put into preparing the first child is very important.

As the last month of pregnancy approaches, it is as well to plan what to tell the child about the actual birth and make very careful plans to ensure that the existing child's security is not undermined.

Before I had my second child, I had watched a toddler react to his mother when she returned after a week's absence carrying a new baby. It was heartbreaking to see the toddler, who had gone through the various stages of anxiety, panic, despair and apathy, recognize and then reject his mother on her return.

Such an absence meant that the mother had two heavy tasks — to settle in the new baby and coax her alienated child back into a satisfactory relationship — while the child had to repair his damaged relationship with his mother and at the same time come to terms with the new baby.

The emotional damage done seemed enormous and so unnecessary. It still seems so to me.

Luckily nowadays, most maternity hospitals have family visiting hours when the child can visit his mother in hospital. It is absolutely vital that he should be brought to see his mother as often as possible so as not to interfere with his emotional bond with her.

To a small child, the present is infinite and he cannot visualize tomorrow or next week. He just knows he misses his mother, and the anguish is unbearable.

Yes, he may well cry and scream when he has to say goodbye and leave his mother in hospital, but this is a good healthy sign. It means that he is reacting normally and is still at the stage of protest.

It's a child who [illegible] quiet and apathetic and make[illegible] moves of recognition who is [illegible] rough an emotional cri[illegible] serious than the tears and healthy yells of the other.

So don't be upset at the child's noisy protests — they are a good thing!

But before all this happens, make sure you explain in detail every step of the process. Some children come to visit their mother and think they have come to take her away and leave the baby there. They are very surprised to find mother and baby are staying, or in other cases, that baby is coming home.

One of the arguments for home births is that it prevents much of the confusion and misery of separation for the existing toddler.

There's another way round the birth week which causes little or no disturbance in a toddler. I discovered it by accident.

Beds were so short in my local maternity hospital that only those mothers who were having first babies or who had a strong medical reason were admitted to hospital. Everyone else had home births.

Those of us who were admitted to hospital only stayed one day if the birth had been normal and went back home the day after the baby's birth in order to make room for the next mother.

It was an arrangement that worked perfectly. One was away for such a brief period that the toddler didn't even notice the mother's absence, or if he did, the separation was so brief that none of the classic signs of anxiety had time to develop.

It was a great way for mother and baby too — she was freed from, hospital routines, back in her own bed in her own house, able to feed and cuddle the baby whenever he needed it and whenever she wanted it.

Family friends and midwife rally round. It's a splendid way to involve a husband too, if he can be home for the first week or fortnight, coping with both his children and understanding what baby routines, night feeds and 24-hour duties involve.

Some mothers have tried it here in New Zealand, but have met with resistance from hospitals. But there's no really good reason, if the mother had a normal birth and has arranged for help, why she shouldn't go home with the baby. If the mother badly needs a rest then perhaps she is better off not in hospital but in a convalescent home, which is not what hospitals are. There is a definite need for convalescent homes in our health system, it seems to me.

But at the birth of a second child, I felt that my existing child's emotional needs mattered more than many other considerations.

Whether it is a home birth or hospital, the emotional needs of the first child must neve take second place.

The art of parenting at this stage is how to reconcile the needs of the new baby, and the elder child.

When succeeding children are born it is easier, but the first time the only child has to accept a brother or a sister is an enormous, world-shaking event in his life.

How to make it a happy event at any rate to ease the i[illegible] pangs is an important [illegible] the mother and [illegible] sibilities to the[illegible] subject w[illegible] article.

Children
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