



Your firstborn got hours of undivided attention, a meticulously crafted bedtime routine, and crawling pathways paved with Purell. Your second gets... the flu from his older sister. In a growing and more chaotic family, does the baby suffer? The short answer is no. But here's proof.

by **ELIZABETH PASSARELLA** / photographs by **PRISCILLA GRAGG**



**IN A FAVORITE** family video from 2012, my then 2½-year-old is reading—okay, “reading”—to her 5-month-old brother on the couch. She pauses every few seconds, with dramatic exasperation that I now know well, to swat down his flailing hands or reposition him so that he can properly pay attention to her. At the time, I was thinking, “Wow, is this what it’s come to? Outsourcing reading to a toddler who can’t even read and may let the baby roll right off the couch, just so I can go to the bathroom?” But now, I just think it’s hilarious.

Of course, I have the hindsight of knowing that (a) the baby didn’t roll off the couch, and (b) he’s no worse for wear from a little benign motherly neglect. In fact, experts agree that being the second baby to a busier but wiser parent can even give a child a leg up in a lot of ways. We’ll help you reframe the most angst-inducing younger-sibling scenarios.

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**Family reading time consists of whatever your older child wants—and she doesn’t want board books.**

Reading is reading. Don’t worry that the baby is chewing on his graphic black-

and-white board book or crawling over to the play kitchen while listening to something way over his head. “The little one hears the tone of your voice and the kindness in your expression. If you are happily reading a book to your 3-year-old, the baby is gaining,” says Jane Scott, M.D., a pediatrician in Castle Rock, Colorado, and coauthor of *The Confident Parent*. Yes, research does show that 60 percent of firstborn children have a higher IQ than their younger siblings, likely because they get more high-quality attention, reading, and guided play from their parents. “It is really the only trait that holds up when it comes to birth order,” says Sarah Trosper Olivo, Ph.D., a psychologist in Rye, New York.

Still, IQ is far from everything. “My first child still has trouble using a fork! My second will likely be motivated to learn more things on his own,” says Vanessa LoBue, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. Having siblings is also associated with better social-emotional skills and may buffer against depression and self-esteem problems, says Dr. LoBue. And just wait until the smarty-pants older sibling takes charge of nightly bedtime reading duties entirely. Heaven!

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**The baby has been sitting in the bouncy seat for what feels like hours while you deal with the toddler. So much for focused eye contact and cooing.**

You aren’t smiling 6 inches from the baby’s face and introducing him to new vocabulary words all afternoon. But you know who is? Your firstborn. “The baby hears plenty of words from his older sibling—and he probably understands them better that way anyway,” says Dr. Olivo. “Honestly, I sometimes wish I could go back and neglect my first child a little more. My younger one is more independent, more patient, and doesn’t need as much constant attention.”

It’s something that experienced parents say all the time: Second kids are more easygoing and can entertain themselves, possibly because they didn’t have your undivided attention. So don’t feel guilty. Include the baby in big-kid activities when you can—lay out a blanket and let him roll around (he still needs tummy time!) while you build blocks with your toddler or get her dressed. “The ambient noise and interaction in the room will make your baby feel comforted,” says Dr. Olivo.

You can lean on other family members and friends too. “Build your village! You want both your children to be happy and comfortable in the care of other people, even if that’s your partner,” says Dr. Scott. It’s the key to snagging not only one-on-one time with each of your kids but also much-needed “alone time.”

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**Your first kid lived in a germ-free bubble. The baby has already had three colds, croup, and a hospital visit. Yikes!**

With an older sibling coughing into his face as she kisses him good night, the second child is going to get sick more often. There’s no getting around it. In fact, children less than 6 months old who have older siblings are more than twice as likely to be hospitalized with the flu as other children, according to a study in the *European Respiratory Journal*. “My ICU is filled with 2-month-olds who have



2-year-old siblings. We see significantly more respiratory infections in second children,” says Chani Traube, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics at Weill Cornell Medical Center, in New York City. Although these illnesses may be stressful in the moment, they can be an advantage down the road. “Second children are exposed to many more pathogens than their older siblings, so they build up immunity. They may be sicker in the first few years of their lives, but they are healthier later on and often have fewer allergies and more hearty antibodies,” says Dr. Traube.

While you’re still in the trenches, do what you can: Wash your hands, try to keep a sick kid away from a baby sibling (have one child go on a sleepover with Grandma!), and change your shirt often. Think about it: You cuddle the snotty sick kid against your chest, then switch to the baby, who nuzzles the same spot. And make sure everyone in the house, including babysitters, gets a flu shot.

As for being constantly terrified that the baby will end up in the hospital with a sibling-induced injury, like having a Shopkins shoved down his windpipe? Be smart, but don’t stress out. “You shouldn’t leave a toddler unsupervised around an infant. Two-year-olds don’t have good judgment. But those kinds of injuries are exceedingly uncommon,” says Dr. Traube.

**You’ve got grocery shopping to do and preschool gymnastics class to attend. Guess the baby is napping in the car or the stroller. Again.**

No big deal, especially when the baby is a newborn who sleeps erratically and feeds on demand. “There’s a chance he’ll be more flexible down the road if he’s not used to being in his crib all the time,” points out Dr. LoBue. That said, once the baby is older and on a more consistent schedule (for example, he takes a nap every afternoon from 1 to 3 P.M.), you may want to rethink the situation. Can you eliminate the 2:30 gymnastics class for a few months? Or could you pick a weekend music class, when you’ll have more family help, instead?



“It will never be perfect, but planning to be out when the baby typically naps may be stressful for you or a caregiver,” says Dr. Scott. And keep in mind that not every activity for your toddler has to be a class. A nature walk with no rigid start time can be just as enriching. For nonnegotiable activities like school pickup, carpool when possible or adjust the baby’s schedule. Maybe try a longer morning nap and a shorter afternoon one.

**Remember the baby playgroup you had with your first? You’re still socializing with that crew. The new baby will never have his own friends.**

Relax. Baby #2 will have friends of his own when he starts going to classes or school. And, let’s be honest, the best part of those baby playdates was adult interaction for you. One of the main goals of socializing is to learn how to share and negotiate, something your second child will be aware of from the start. And being around his older sibling’s friends can be great. “Older kids know more, say more, and have more to offer,” says Dr. LoBue.

If you notice that your secondborn has a “reactive” temperament—what she describes as being sensitive to strangers and anxious about changes in his routine—then you may need to be a bit more receptive to letting him warm

up to new situations at his own pace. “Those kids tend to grow up to be on the shy side. But moms have a good instinct about when their kid needs some socialization, so trust your gut,” Dr. LoBue says.

**Your toddler is watching Peppa Pig while you get dressed, which means the baby is (sigh) getting inadvertent screen time.**

Until recently, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that children under 18 months should have zero screen time, so we think our babies’ eyeballs will melt if they see a TV. Not so. Like occasional junk food in an otherwise healthy diet, a bit of passive screen time isn’t going to negatively affect a baby’s overall brain development.

The problem for a child at any age comes when screens are taking the place of other activities, like reading or playing outside. But that’s certainly not the case when you’re putting on *Sesame Street* solely so that you can cook dinner in peace. If the baby gets some passive viewing, so be it. Just don’t fool yourself into thinking that the baby is learning words from TV, even if it’s educational programming. “There’s no negative, but there’s no positive either,” says Dr. LoBue. “However, a baby can learn from interacting with someone on FaceTime. He can learn a new word from a grandparent through a screen.”

**Bedtime routine for baby? Ha. You’re doing well if you remember to turn out the lights.**

It’s important to have some sort of routine, but your baby doesn’t need an hour to wind down. (Neither does your toddler, although that ship may have sailed.) “It can be a quick song, the pacifier, and lights-out,” says Dr. Olivo. “As long as the steps are the same, you’re cuing the baby’s circadian rhythm that it’s time to sleep.” Babies pick up on their parents’ anxiety, so being a more relaxed second-time parent at bedtime (and, well, all the time) can actually be a blessing. You’re chill, he’s chill, and you both get more sleep. It’s a win-win. ☒