Maternal Reaction to the Birth of a Second Child: Another Side of Sibling Rivalry

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ABSTRACT: Mothers may react to the birth of a second child with feelings of sadness and guilt that seem to come from grieving over a decrease in the intensity of the relationship with their first child. Since these feelings can interfere with the way mothers deal with their first child's behavior, clinicians who see children with behavioral problems should be alert to this second child syndrome.

Introduction

The birth of a second child requires adjustments by all family members. For the first child this event represents a major developmental challenge which has been well studied and is referred to as sibling rivalry. In striving to cope with the loss of primary position the first child may develop regressive, attention-seeking, or negative behavior; he may also express hostility to the new baby either verbally or physically.

Parents also must adjust to the changed, enlarged family. For example, new economic demands are made on them, and they have less time for themselves. Unpleasant behavior demonstrated by the dethroned first child is an additional problem. For assistance in dealing with the behavior of the first child parents may seek advice from friends, family, books, or professionals. Most of the time the parents and first child make the necessary adjustments and the behavioral disturbance resolves. However, some families experience great or persistent difficulty.

We have counseled a number of such families and have observed that the mother had profound feelings of guilt and sadness. The presence of these feelings seemed to prevent the mother from...
effectively dealing with the behavioral changes in her firstborn. This was especially striking to us when it occurred in families who had not previously experienced any child-rearing problems. As we worked with these mothers we began to suspect that these feelings of guilt and sadness were a product of what appeared to be maternal grief. These mothers perceived a change in the intense relationship that they had experienced with their first child; they felt a loss of something important and valuable, and they felt sad and guilty about it.

Since we have not seen previous descriptions of maternal feelings surrounding the birth of a second child and how they might impact the way a mother first handled her first child, we are presenting these observations to others who counsel parents about their children's behavior. We have used the phrase "second child syndrome" to characterize this phenomenon.

Illustrative Cases

Case 1

During her second pregnancy, Mrs. W became concerned about sibling rivalry and made efforts to prevent her three year old daughter, Stephanie, from becoming jealous. Mrs. W took Stephanie with her to prenatal visits with the obstetrician, had her feel the baby kick, and assured her that she would be a big help in caring for "our" new baby. However, six weeks prior to her due date Mrs. W sought advice from her pediatrician because Stephanie was becoming increasingly active and negative, especially in public places or when visiting her maternal grandparents. Mrs. W felt her pregnancy was the cause of Stephanie's behavior and that her efforts to prevent jealousy had failed. She described feeling that her relationship with Stephanie was different than before. She doubted that she could take care of two children.

Following the baby's birth, Stephanie's behavior continued to be a problem for her mother. She began sucking her thumb, and she was very demanding when her mother was feeding or diapering the baby. By the time of the baby's two-month checkup, Stephanie's behavior had improved; she had stopped sucking her thumb but was still negative and demanding when her grandparents visited. She had never directed any negative or aggressive behavior toward the baby.

Comment

Mrs. W tried to prevent problems but was unable to deal with them because she felt she had made Stephanie jealous and unhappy by getting pregnant. How could she make her even more unhappy by disciplining her? With counseling, Mrs. W was able to see that setting limits was even more important now in order to assure Stephanie that she loved her as much as ever.