



# The tricky balance...

Parents often worry they won't love their second child as much as their first. So how do you work out a new equilibrium in your family dynamics?

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**S**TILL IN A sleepy haze, I heard my husband in the hospital corridor. The door opened and my two-year-old, Jessica, edged shyly into the room. She had come to meet Solomon, her day-old brother, and was full of excited expectation. I'd been in hospital for nearly a week – the longest we'd ever been apart – and the sight of her filled me with pleasure. For a second, Solomon was forgotten, I just wanted to cuddle my little girl. But before I could stop myself as Jessica scrambled up on to the bed, her elbows digging into me, her hands poking Solomon's tiny face, I'd uttered the fateful word: "Careful!" The chasm between the fragile newborn and the robust, determined toddler seemed so vast.

In the weeks and months that followed, however hard I tried not to, "Stop!", "Wait!" and "Sssshhh!" were forever on my lips. I had become a Jekyll-and-Hyde mother: tender one moment, then cross the next. I knew Jessica was doing her best, yet every cell in my body seemed geared up to protect Solomon. It was hard not to feel irritated when Jessica climbed into the Moses basket wearing her muddy wellies or clambered on to my shoulders whenever I breastfed or shoved her face up against the baby's just when I'd got him to doze off.

I was hormonal and exhausted from lack of sleep. My little girl's emotions were in turmoil, too. She'd been given a baby brother, whom she wasn't allowed near; and, since his arrival, I'd had no time for her. But knowing how she was feeling didn't make me more patient, tolerant or understanding. Before Solomon was born, I'd worried if

I could love another child like I loved my daughter. But after he was born, I was shocked to find it was Jessica I had difficulty loving. Only late at night, when I kissed her goodnight and paused for a moment to watch her sleeping, was I able to feel that familiar swell of unadulterated tenderness.

But in the mornings Jessica would bound out of bed, full of energy wanting to play while Solomon and I just wanted to sleep. I found it hard to cope. I felt alone and guilty for preferring my son over my daughter. I couldn't talk to my husband: he didn't understand why I was worried. In his eyes, Jessica was the same wonderful girl as before. He worried that he wasn't getting to know Solomon properly. I couldn't talk openly to my friends: how could I confess

## "Sometimes the love of the first child is displaced by the newborn baby"

how I felt? I thought I was doing something wrong. If I was just more organised, more energetic, more patient, it would be fine.

I tried to find books about coping with two children – but there weren't any. The general assumption seemed to be that having a second child was just a re-run of the first, but, for me, it was very different. For six months I struggled through, then there came a turning point. Sitting in our garden with a friend and a fellow mother of two, I tentatively mentioned how worried I was about my relationship with Jessica. "It's like there's a distance between us since Solomon was born," I confessed. Instead of recoiling in horror, my friend

was sympathetic. "The same thing happened to me," she confided. "For about a year after Bridget was born, I found I couldn't cope with Tom. We just didn't like each other. He seemed so big, clumsy and noisy. I'd long for his dad to come home and take him off my hands." This lifted a weight off my heart.

Knowing I wasn't alone made me feel more confident and I began talking to other mothers. Time after time I heard similar stories of parents – mostly mothers – torn between two children. Each time the mother seemed relieved to know she was not alone. Their experiences inspired me to write a book about having a second child. Once I started to interview other mothers and healthcare professionals, I quickly realised my experience was a common one. Some

women shared my experience: the love of their first child had been displaced by their newborn baby. Others didn't feel the same gush of love they'd had with their first child, and it had taken a while for their feelings for the new baby to take hold.

Shona Gore, a tutor for the National Childbirth Trust, who has run courses for second-time parents, believes it's hard to prepare women for the changes a second child brings. "Even though it's such a common experience, you can't say to parents that they may fall out of love with their first child for a while. Instead, you get them to think about how demanding their older child may seem compared to a small baby so that it's not such a shock when it happens," says Gore. Nothing, however, can ever prepare you for that shock – perhaps because we don't want to believe it's true. Try telling mothers-of-one that they might temporarily experience an alteration, even a teeny-weeny diminution, in their affections

for their firstborn, and they look at you with disgust and contempt, as if you'd suggested drowning a kitten.

I was one of those mothers. About a year before my second child was born, I'd taken my daughter swimming, and while we were changing I could hear a mother in the next cubicle. She had two children, a boy of about five and a baby. "There, my precious! We're going swimming," she cooed to the baby. Then she swung round to the older boy, who was playing, and snarled; "Stop that, do you hear! Just stop it this minute!" I was appalled. I would never be like that.

**T**HE WAYS IN which the feelings for our children can change after the birth of a second child is undoubtedly one of the more hidden aspects of second-time motherhood. It is also something many mothers experience, but very few feel able to talk about. Indeed, the biggest shock for many mothers is not only how much she loves her children, but also how intensely she can at times dislike them. The ideal of steady, selfless maternal love is still powerful in our culture, but it seldom exists in reality – just about manageable with one, perhaps, but virtually impossible with two.

When the US sociologist Robert Stewart conducted a study of couples who'd just had a second child, he found that unrealistic expectations explained much of the strain that occurred between parents and firstborns. Stewart found that the mothers were very happy with their firstborn after the birth of their second child, but became increasingly dissatisfied as the year went on. When the researchers looked more closely at what these children were doing, it seemed to them that the mothers' annoyance was out of all proportion to the children's behaviour. Stewart concluded that mothers were not allowing enough time for the older child to adjust to having a younger sibling. Or rather, they were not allowing for the fact that the older child needed to keep on adjusting as the baby's needs and personality changed.

"The children had to keep on altering their strategies to regain or maintain parental involvement," explains Stewart, "but the mothers didn't see it like that. They just saw it as a frustrating level of naughtiness. This simple mismatch



## FALLING IN LOVE AGAIN

- Losing a sense of closeness with a child can feel distressing, but it is usually temporary. Your relationship will recover.
- Get out your firstborn's baby album and remind yourself how adorable he once was and will be again.
- Allow yourself time to bond with your new baby, but don't expect the relationship to happen overnight. Also allow yourself time to forge a relationship with your first child – away from your baby – by doing fun things together.
- Get help from family friends or babysitters to ensure you get regular time alone with each child.
- If you still feel unloving to either your first or second child after a year, talk to your child or health visitor about a referral for specialist help, as there may be more deep-seated reasons for your feelings.

between the child's view of the situation and the parent's was adding considerably to the strain on both."

So what can parents do? For a start, it's a great idea to spend time alone with each child, to get to know the newborn and to

## "The ways our feelings change is a hidden aspect of second-time motherhood"

reforge the link with your older child. Fathers often take a bit longer to bond with their younger child than they did with their first, especially if they're very close and involved with their firstborn.

A first child is a shared focus, a link between you, but when there are two children, parents often cope by splitting the responsibility: in most cases, the mother takes the baby while the father takes the older child. But try it the other way round occasionally and you will all benefit.

In my case, what helped me eventually was time. My baby stopped needing me so intensely; my daughter stopped finding him such a threat; and I slowly adapted to loving and caring for not one but two children. It became easier to do things together. Taking them both swimming, without another adult in tow was a personal triumph equivalent to winning an Olympic medal. It also became easier to do things on my own once in a while. And,

gradually, I found that loving both my children was natural again; and I now adore them equally.

My tiny newborn is now a strapping three-year-old whose favourite game is posting wet wipes down the loo and who regards "poo-poo-head" as a perfectly appropriate form of greeting. My six-year-old daughter won't yet hang up her coat, but she'll sit still while I put her shoes on, and she can fasten her own seatbelt. Even after three years of intensive training, though, there are still days when the most basic aspects of life with two children are beyond me. The daily morning 'routine' in our household frequently resembles one of those Benny Hill sketches where people in various states of undress chase each other around. But I've learnt to lower my expectations. And so many of the things that parents find hard during those early years of life with two children could be more tolerable

if only we were able to speak more openly about our experiences – often there are simple solutions and it's a real comfort just to know you're not the only one.

Each phase of life with small children brings its own challenges and rewards. Why does it seem anything but entirely natural that you should find loving your child easier at some stages than at others? No phase with children lasts for ever. Knowing this fact is a resource that you can draw upon again and again. More than any other bit of information you may have gleaned from having your first child, this is the one that sees you through.

With your second child, you know he won't always want to spend all day attached to your breast; you know he won't wake at night forever; you know that the colour of his pyjamas won't always be of the utmost importance; and the phase when he has to scrutinise every puddle on the way to shop is just that – a phase. The message is, enjoy it while you can ■

## RESOURCES

### FURTHER READING

- *Sibling Rivalry* by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge (Bantam Press, £12.99).
- *Three Shoes, One Sock And No Hairbrush* by Rebecca Abrams (Cassell Illustrated, £9.99).
- *Your Second Child* by Joan Solomon Weiss (Fireside Books, £9).