

Oh, brother...

It has to be hard for a preschooler to gain a baby brother or sister—especially after being an only child.

So imagine gaining a “baby” brother who can already run, jump, play with all your toys, and scream when you grab them away from him.

As much as we thought we had tried to prepare Leo for big brotherhood, he was blindsided when we walked into the house with his new brother one year ago.

The first week or two were tentatively fun. Then, as the days passed, and Leo realized this little brother wasn’t going anywhere, he became confused, hurt, and angry.

Seeking sound advice

We turned to every resource we could find—books, the Internet, family members. No one seemed to have had a similar experience, and the advice just didn’t apply.

Then I remembered that the social workers at Catholic Charities had promised to be there throughout our children’s lives. I poured out our concerns to them. They listened and calmly offered help.

Remember that your older son feels the way you would feel if your husband just brought home a mistress and asked you to be nice to her, they told me.

When both boys need or want something, serve Leo first, they said. Then enlist his help in serving his little brother.

Build one-on-one time into each day for Leo, they said. If you can, do activities separately with the boys.

It seemed counter-intuitive. Hadn’t we traveled halfway around the world to give Leo the gift of a little brother? And now we were going to find ways for them to spend less time together? Besides, wasn’t bonding with Daniel our priority right now?

Strategies that helped us

As it turned out, the social workers were right. Some days as we found the one-on-one time for Leo, I wasn't sure whether we were doing it to reassure Leo or to preserve our sanity, but it didn't matter. It was keeping the peace in our household, and it seemed to be helping Leo get through the day.

I'd give Leo a small bag of snacks and put him in charge of handing them out. Daniel didn't get as many, but he didn't care. And Leo reveled in the responsibility and the extra snacks.

Our social workers also recommended a few books, including *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too*, which I devoured. It gave us practical advice—such as to let the children resolve some of the problems themselves—and a new perspective on how it feels to become an older brother.

I'm the third of six children, and I don't recall feeling displaced in my family. John is the youngest of seven, so he never was. Even though we could understand that Leo would be upset by this change, it was hard for us to recognize just how his world had been turned upside down.

Years ago, before I was married, I remember my mother telling me that when the baby and the toddler are crying at the same time, you reach for the toddler. The baby won't remember; the toddler will. Suddenly I found myself raising two children who would remember, including one who had known us for just a short time.

After a while, crocodile

Looking back, I wish I had kept a journal of our experiences. All I know is that each month as I looked back, the situation seemed to be getting a little better—though rarely as quickly as I thought it should.

Over time, I came to grips with the fact that, with the addition of Daniel, our family dynamic had changed significantly. I often felt that instead of parenting one new child, I was parenting two new children. While trying to figure out his new footing in the family, Leo—who is a master mimic—was imitating his active, boisterous, fun-

filled little brother, while working desperately to keep his parents' attention focused on him.

Six months ago we enrolled Leo in preschool and then started Daniel earlier this summer. Being at school together—but in separate classrooms—has been especially good for their friendship. Their teachers comment on how close they are, and, as I watch our boys together—especially when they don't know I am nearby—I believe that's true.

When I arrive to pick up the boys up, Leo and Daniel are almost always together on the playground.

Some days I overhear our big brother giving his little brother instructions for a game.

Other days, I watch them holding hands as they run across the playground.

Yesterday when I pulled into the parking lot, I saw them spinning a plastic crocodile seesaw around in circles, each on one end, running and laughing.

The greatest gift you can give a child

Over the past year I have often thought of Blessed John Paul II's words, "The greatest gift you can give your child is another sibling." And he was so wise.

It's not all smiles and sharing and sunshine around here.

And the journey continues.

But as I look back over the last year, I am amazed how far we have come as a family, and how far our sons—our two magnificent blessings—have come, too.



***Joining Theology Is a Verb and Reconciled to You for Worth Revisiting
Wednesday on Sept. 28, 2016.***