

Sibling anxiety

"After you left this morning, he did something that broke my heart," said Cynthia, the sweetest, most gentle daycare lady in the world.

My first thought was that my son had hit one of the other kids – that inescapable Irish temper. But what she said next was totally unexpected.

"He just stood at the top of the steps staring out the door for several minutes before I called him over. Then, he crawled into my arms and cried and cried for you."

For many parents, this separation anxiety is a daily occurrence. At almost 3 years of age, this was the very first time my son cried because I wasn't around. My son is Mr. Social; he will strike up a conversation with anyone, anywhere, at any time, which is scary in and of itself. But, because we are pulled into work so often, he's also used to being cared for by adults who aren't my husband or me (but thankfully are usually his wonderful and devoted grandparents) The time we spend together as a family is always special, but unfortunately not as quantitative as any of us would like.

A rush of competing feelings came over me. First came the pity. How awful that the sad little boy missed his mommy! Next, I felt a sort of relief and, though I'm ashamed to admit it, even slight gratification that my child loves me enough to miss me when I'm gone. The final emotion that struck that afternoon was the most painful: the guilt of my long hours, and especially of the ever-nearing arrival of our second child.

It had to be the baby, I decided. We've just about finished decorating his or her room with creamsicle paint, an alphabet bedding set, and pages of our favorite story books. The swing which once soothed my son as an infant is set to repeat its service in the living room. Tiny clothing waits to be folded, while my own shirts and dresses appear painted on my giant belly. We've been reading "I'm a Big Brother Now" every night before bed. Complete strangers tell me I'm about to pop (as though I weren't aware). At the later end of age 2, my son is wise enough to realize his whole world is about to change forever.

When I dropped my son off at daycare the second day, I had to witness separation anxiety in the flesh. Any “good” feelings I had about the tears my son shed for me in my absence were washed away as he clung to me and told me not to leave. Within a minute, I was crying, too, along with Cynthia and her niece, Tasha, who also looks after the children.

“He never cries!” Tasha sobbed. And we cried some more. Finally, my son climbed into Cynthia’s lap and after hugging and kissing him goodbye, I left, my heart heavier than it had ever been.

How could I cause my child so much pain? Does he think he’s being replaced by his brother or sister? What can I do to make this easier?

Obviously, I’m not the first person to bring a second child into the family, but as parents there are some experiences we must endure that challenge our internal strength. I’ve talked to numerous friends and family members about how they prepared their children for the arrival of a new baby. The most significant thing I’ve learned for sure is that every situation is unique. Every family handles things differently, as does every child.

The age difference between children certainly has an impact on how the transition from only child to sibling will occur. My brother and I are 16 months apart, so I didn’t really know what was going on when he joined our household. My husband is five years younger than his sister, who was eager for a live baby, rather than a doll, to dress up and play with. My aunt and my father are 18 years apart, so she’s always been a second mother figure for him. One of my former students who babysits my son from time to time told me that her three nieces, all of whom are between two and three years apart, went through a similar experience to ours every time her sister was pregnant with another child. The good news: once the babies came home, the separation anxiety all but disappeared.

Gender differences also play a role in how older children will take to a new baby. Girls tend to be more excited, as they are both genetically and socially wired to nurture. Boys, like mine, are more likely to cling to their mothers and exhibit jealousy.

Some children dislike any disruption to their daily routines, while others celebrate novel experiences. My son falls into the latter category. He's inherited the adventurous spirit my husband and I share. Children who do not like or aren't used to change usually have the toughest time adapting to a new baby in their house, but even those who are accustomed to a dynamic day-to-day life can struggle with such a major upheaval.

When I woke up this morning, "Landslide" by Stevie Nicks was stuck in my head. I've always loved the song, but the lyrics really spoke to me today. The impact that earth-shattering change can have on our relationships tests our faith and our fortitude, but it also causes everyone involved to grow. As parents and children, God built us to withstand these and all circumstances.

If I can portray the addition of our new family member as the fun and exciting experience it's supposed to (and will) be, hopefully big brother will climb on board. As we count down the days until baby's arrival, there are special sibling stories to read, "Big Brother" shirts to wear with pride, stuffed animals for our little helper to practice diapering and feeding, extra hugs and kisses, and many, many prayers to be said.