On Your Mind

July, 2018

**Baby/Back to School themes**

**Jonathan C. Robinson, Ph.D.**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

My husband and I just brought our newborn home from the hospital. We are thrilled to have our third son. Adam’s brothers are two and six years old. Benjy, our two year old, seems very jealous of his baby brother. He wants to hold him. He keeps his hands in Adam’s face. We tell him “no” and swipe his hands away, and Benjy just dissolves into tears. I fear we are making things worse, but we can’t have this behavior from Benjy toward his little brother. Signed, Going Crazy

Dear GC,

Ahh. Sibling rivalry. It starts very young, doesn’t it? You know, of course, that Benjy is just curious. He wonders who this new person is. He’s also jealous. He’s not the center of attention anymore. He sees Adam as a threat and an interloper.

And yet, what you describe, both from Benjy and for yourself, is all very normal and expected. From the sibling’s perspective, newborns are both the best and the worst thing ever to happen to them. Of course, your oldest son is able to be somewhat helpful to his new brother. You don’t mention his issues, as I imagine he’s protective and pitching in.

Benjy, on the other hand, is old enough to be mobile and curious, but not old enough to be considerate and helpful. At least not with close instruction and supervision. Here’s my two cents.

It’s not too late to have a family meeting. All hands on deck, even Adam. Make your observations of concerns you have. Also, normalize the changes in family and how you all can manage these new things. Ask a lot of questions of your children. What’s different in the house? How does that make you feel? How can we all adjust to these differences? What can you do to help? How will things change over time?

Because Adam and Benjy are closer in age to each other than either is to your oldest, Benjy doesn’t yet understand that he has an emerging playmate and best friend in Adam. Benjy’s used to being the youngest in the family, so you need to help him understand how his role is changing. Talk about how everybody needs attention and how the family can meet those needs while also keeping Adam safe and caring for him as the littlest and most vulnerable.

After clearing the air, you and your husband might want to create new rules for the house that account for Adam’s arrival. Be sure to post any new rules you adopt and any time-sharing that comes up. Many parents in multi-child homes make effort to have one-on-one time with each child at some point each week, in addition to family time and activities. Congratulations on your new arrival. Hope these thoughts help.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

Summer’s been great! We are all exhausted, but in a good way. Of course, George and I are gearing up for our kids going back to school, but they don’t want summer to end. We’re getting a lot of pleading, begging, grouching, and sulking. Why can’t they just feel good about all that we’ve done with and for them this summer, and get ready to get back to school? Signed, Pleased but Puzzled

Dear Pleased,

It sounds like you and George are on a different page than your kids. No surprise there. End of summer is the time of year where some families stumble into the school year with a lot of yelling and demanding. That’s no fun for anyone. The reality is that transition to the new school year is a fact of life. It’s going to happen whether all parties want it or not. So, what to do to ease the tension and pull together on the transition?

First, consider your children’s behavior not so much as manipulation as evidence of their emotional fever. What to do with emotional fevers? That’s right. Active listening. This is your opportunity to hear their feelings and feed them back to them. As they feel heard, there will be less begging, pleading, grouching, and sulking.

However, once their emotional fevers are down, switch to problem-solving. They take the lead on how to effectively transition to the new school year. As they bring up non-starters and lapse into begging again, tenderly but purposefully confront them. Go on another short vacation? No! Why not? No! But… What part of No don’t you understand? Active listen their frustration and then redirect.

After you’ve established the boundaries, redirect the discussion toward what all of you can do to make a good transition. New school clothes? Homework desk supplies? Reminiscing good times? Goals and objectives for the new school year? Looking forward to reconnecting with school friends?

Use a wall calendar posted in a common area (kitchen? den?) to spread out the family do-list for school preparations. Heap lots of praise for cooperation and task completion. Stick to your guns and spread the load. When the kids realize you mean business, they will embrace the tasks and gear up for the new school year.