

Caretaker Children

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

It was almost 8:30 am. In three minutes, Marcy would be late for her meeting and she still had six-year-old Nel to take to the bus stop and eight-month-old Paul to day care. Then Paul began his telltale wail. Two minutes and counting and Paul needed a bottle.

It was one of those mornings. Marcy has been having a lot of them lately with her new job. She needed a little help, especially with the baby.

Why not Nel?

Given a little encouragement, instruction, and oversight most children are capable of helping with babies.

And there are many possible benefits to enlisting an older child's help. Your workload will be lightened after you have taken time to train and monitor your child until you are both comfortable with this activity. And simple caretaking chores may ease sibling rivalry, teach children about responsibility, and prepare them for babysitting.

The kind of help a child can offer will depend on you, the child's age, and other factors. It's up to you to decide what jobs are appropriate.

You should convince, not coerce, a child to help. Most are eager, but some are not. And some jobs are more attractive than others. There's nothing appealing about changing a diaper, for example.

Start with the fun and easy things. Try having your older child play with the baby on the floor. You do it first, then ask your child to take over. Watch from a distance. Limit the dos and don'ts to those that are absolutely necessary for safety.

From there, hold practice sessions on basic baby care – holding, burping, feeding, and diapering, for example. You demonstrate with baby, and have your child initiate with a doll. Once you're comfortable with your child's progress, ease into the real thing.

As you increase responsibility and independence, always keep safety in mind. Diapering on a changing table is not a good idea for younger children. Have the child diaper the baby on the floor.

Bathing a baby is also dicey. Handling a freshly-bathed, wet, slippery, squirming baby is too much to ask of a young child. You need to be in charge, but your child can help with bath play and drying.

And don't discriminate. Boys can handle simple baby care jobs, too. Regardless of gender, with a little patience and training, your older child might be the helping hand you're looking for.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Co-Director of the Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.