



Sibling Camaraderie

BY JACI CONRY // ILLUSTRATION BY GRACIA LAM



GROWING UP, I loved riding in my friend Jennie’s family station wagon, along with her three siblings. I relished every minute in the back seat: the laughing and raised voices, the teasing, the bickering—it was all so unusual for me, an only child.

In my family, I felt lonely on long car rides and many other occasions. My parents were loving, involved, and generous. But I ached for a sibling—an older one who would look out for me; a younger one who would look up to me. Even as an adult who understands that some sibling relationships are complicated, I still long for the camaraderie of a sister or brother who shares my history.

Soon after giving birth to my son, Max, in 2010, I began thinking about getting pregnant again. I ardently wanted him to have the sibling I didn’t have—someone with whom to share the magic of Christmas morning and combat boredom on rainy afternoons; an ally to commiserate with and confide in during childhood and in later decades, when my husband and I reach old age.

While some stereotypes about only children are exaggerated, some are true. Although I wasn’t spoiled or selfish, I struggled socially. I didn’t want Max to be a shy child, uncertain around his peers and more comfortable with adults, as I had been.

Max was born prematurely and required extra attention during his first months. After his first birthday, life was beginning to settle down for my husband and me. While I could see benefits of waiting until Max was older to have a second child, I was afraid to put it off. I became pregnant when he was 16 months old.

My second pregnancy was difficult. *Hyperemesis gravidarum*, the debilitating form of morning sickness that put Kate Middleton in the news a few months ago, kept me bedridden deep into my second trimester. Later,

a herniated disk in my back severely limited my mobility, and I developed gestational diabetes from hormone injections I received to prevent premature birth. Because I needed his help so much at home, my husband saw his business suffer. He was stressed out, our relationship was strained, and I was guilt-ridden over the hours Max spent with his baby sitter.

Yet as hard as my pregnancy was, my daughter Emma’s birth last July was a breeze. Though I worried he’d feel jealous, Max regarded his sister with interest that morphed into adoration. At 2½ years old, he’s a protective brother and surprisingly attentive: Whether it’s a sneeze or a distressing wail, he rushes to her side, often before I make it there. He kisses her cheek, rubs her belly, and offers her his treasured blanket. He dances to make Emma stop crying and shares his toys, piling them up next to her on the floor. When he’s been away, he bursts through the door looking for her.

Emma is entranced with her brother. When he’s near, she doesn’t take her eyes off him, doling out her most dazzling smiles and sweetest giggles for him. In the mornings, after Max wakes up, we put Emma in his crib with him. He sings to her and she coos back. Nothing brings me more joy than to see that their relationship has already taken root.

These days, caring for two young children, I’m tired and often feel overwhelmed—I know it probably won’t get easier for a while. But when I see Emma and Max sitting in the back seat of the car, I’m struck with a wave of gratitude. Knowing they have someone with whom to share long car rides, and so many other journeys, makes all the hard parts worthwhile.

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Jaci Conry is a regular contributor to the Globe Magazine. Send comments to connections@globe.com.

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