

Sibling Relationships

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Benefits of siblings

When you do an internet search for the word sibling, the most common articles that come up are all about sibling *rivalry*. But let's start by looking at the benefits of siblings:

Lifelong companions. As children, there's a built-in playmate, a travel companion, co-conspirator and someone to bond with over how "unfair" their parents are to them. Throughout life, a sibling is likely to be the longest-lasting relationship they experience. Not all siblings are friends, and not all siblings love each other – that's not guaranteed. But they will have a history together no one else can match.

Increased independence: Since the parents are often busy with the other child(ren), siblings may learn skills earlier – like learning to tie their own shoes. Also, they may be able to more easily separate from parents and settle in at a class, camp, or school because their sibling can be there with them.

Relationship skills: Living in close quarters with each other can help siblings to learn cooperation, conflict resolution, empathy, forgiveness, and understanding for another person's point of view. This doesn't happen automatically, but it can happen with your support.

For the older child(ren): having a younger sibling is a chance to be a mentor and role model, a chance to help someone out, and a chance to practice responsibility. (But don't over-burden them or make feel *too* responsible. They should always know that you as the parent are responsible for the little ones.)

For younger siblings: Younger siblings get dragged along to lots of activities, but that can mean they learn things earlier: soccer, dance, riding a bike, etc. They tend to read and write and do other academics younger because they have the older child as a role model. They have an opportunity to learn from older siblings' mistakes (e.g. they may start planning for college sooner.)

Reasons why siblings fight

- Having to share: They're tired of having to share space and possessions all the time, every day.
- Jealousy – any time a child doesn't get something that their sibling got, jealousy erupts.
- Differentiation: They're trying to define who they are as an individual, separate from their sibling.
- Sometimes kids have put on their nice social graces for everyone else all day, and need a chance to vent steam with someone they know "has to" still love them later.
- They fight because they're there – conflict gets the adrenaline pumping when you're bored!
- To get your attention.

Setting the stage for positive interaction

Negotiate the sharing of personal space and possessions:

- Teach your children that most toys are communal and must be shared nicely. However, each child has the right to set aside a special place and some special possessions that are theirs alone.
- If the sibling wants to play with the special toys they have to ask, and it's OK to say no.
- For communal possessions and activities, choose things that work at different levels that they can play with together (like blocks or play-dough), and that encourage cooperation not competition.

Be fair and equitable. (This doesn't mean treating your kids *exactly* the same at all times.)

- Make sure each child gets one-on-one attention from you at times each day – and plan a weekly "date" that's all about connecting as individuals.
- There are times when only *one* child can do something that *both* want to do (e.g. press the elevator button, choose where the family will have lunch). Have a way to track whose turn it is.
- Make sure the kids have equitable, developmentally appropriate privileges *and* responsibilities. Don't be overly harsh on your older child and don't baby your younger child.

- Apply the same rules at the same age. (If your older child had a 9:00 pm bedtime when he was 12 years old, your younger one should too, even though her older brother now stays up later.)
- If you change any of the family rules over time, have a discussion with the older child apologizing that you made them live by a rule that you're not asking of their younger sibling.

Help each child have their own identity:

- Your children don't have to do all the same types of things. If your older child plays the violin, it doesn't mean the second one has to play the cello. She could play soccer instead. Plan their activities separately so each can follow their own passions.
- Don't label your children. It's tempting to say "she is our artist and he's the math whiz." But those labels limit them and block you from encouraging their development in all areas.
- Don't compare children to each other. ("Your brother always..." "Your sister is...")

Help your kids find ways to release the day's tensions by sharing them with you or writing them down, or dancing to loud music, or exercising, rather than by taking out tensions on each other.

Accept that some conflict will happen, and let it happen. Don't worry that "they'll never get along."

Catch them being good. Kids crave attention from you, and if they don't get it for positive behavior, they'll act up to get attention for negative behavior. Especially reward good sibling interactions.

Teaching Emotional Intelligence, Relationship Skills, and Conflict Resolution

Throughout their childhood, when they're not mid-conflict, you can model and teach these skills:

- Teach emotional literacy – how to recognize their own emotions and other people's, how to calm yourself down, the idea that all emotions are OK, but not all behaviors are OK. (It's OK to be mad, it's not OK to hurt people or break things because you are mad.)
- Teach that we all try to get our needs met. If someone is misbehaving (e.g. being "mean" to you), try to figure out what they need that's motivating the behavior. If you meet their need, often that will fix the behavior.
- Teach negotiating options... they could trade toys, take turns, divide up a treat (one child divides the pieces, the other gets first pick), making agreements about ways to prevent on-going issues. Teach that if there's a toy/issue they're consistently fighting over, you'll need to take it away from both of them for a toy timeout, so it's better for them to use teamwork to find a solution.

Managing conflict

When a battle begins, try not to jump in to solve it immediately – see if they can figure it out. But do step in when things become hurtful. Set absolute limits that it's never OK to hit, bite, kick, or be cruel.

Before disciplining either child, make sure you have the whole story. It's easy to assume that the older one is at fault, or that the last one holding the stick is at fault. Stop and ask each child to share their perception of the situation. Often it's appropriate to punish both kids. If only one is punished for something, ensure that the innocent party doesn't gloat about it!

If the younger sibling ruins something the older one worked hard on, first offer sympathy: "It's so hard when she wrecks your stuff!" Encourage him to share his anger with you. Then explain that the little one just doesn't get it yet, and think about how to protect the next special creation from them.

If your child needs to vent, let them. They can draw pictures, write, yell, whatever. They may say "I hate my brother." Instead of scolding, say "I know right now you're hating your brother's *behavior* – what he did. I hope you don't hate him as a person. But I get that you're really mad right now."

Recommended Sources: Sibling Rivalry: <https://www.mottchildren.org/posts/your-child/sibling-rivalry>; <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/sibling-rivalry>; <https://afineparent.com/sibling-rivalry>; www.psychologytoday.com/blog/teen-angst/201404/healthy-sibling-relationships