

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR PARENTS

# Managing Sibling Rivalry, Conflict, and Aggression in Childhood



A publication of the Sibling Aggression and  
Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative (SAARA)  
at the University of New Hampshire

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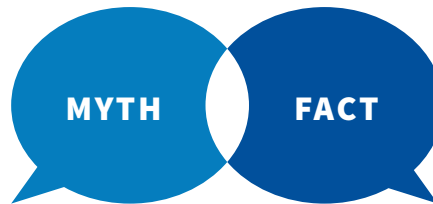
# Understanding Sibling Aggression

Sibling rivalry and sibling conflict are common family occurrences and peak in childhood. But not all brothers and sisters experience the same level of rivalry and conflict. Family dynamics, including parents' emphasis on competitiveness and sibling age gaps, are also linked to the frequency of sibling rivalry and fighting.

**Most of the time, rivalry and conflict are harmless.** In fact, rivalry and conflict can be healthy and help children develop their identities (e.g., *as the kid who excels in sports*) and social and emotional skills, such as learning to compromise.

**Many behaviors are not harmless rivalry or healthy conflict.** Families may dismiss these unhealthy behaviors with comments such as, "*all siblings compete*" or "*all siblings fight*." Excessive rivalry and aggressive behavior between siblings are harmful and should be stopped.

**Addressing conflict and aggression when children are young has long-term benefits.** It helps them build social and emotional skills and strengthens the quality of their relationships with family members and others.



**It's just sibling rivalry.**

**All siblings fight.**

**It's OK if it's a fair fight.**

**Siblings will grow out of it with no long-term harm.**

**When siblings "toughen each other up," it can help prevent school bullying.**

**Young children can't seriously hurt each other.**

**Some sibling behaviors cross the line and require parental intervention.**

**All siblings have conflicts, but aggression and meanness should not be tolerated. Conflicts are an opportunity to teach conflict management and resolution skills.**

**Even if the fight seems fair, how siblings manage and resolve their differences should be a priority.**

**When sibling behaviors cross the line into aggression or abuse, they can cause lasting harm to siblings' relationships.**

**Aggression between siblings at home makes children more likely to experience peer bullying at school.**

**There are lasting mental and physical health impacts of harmful sibling dynamics at any age.**

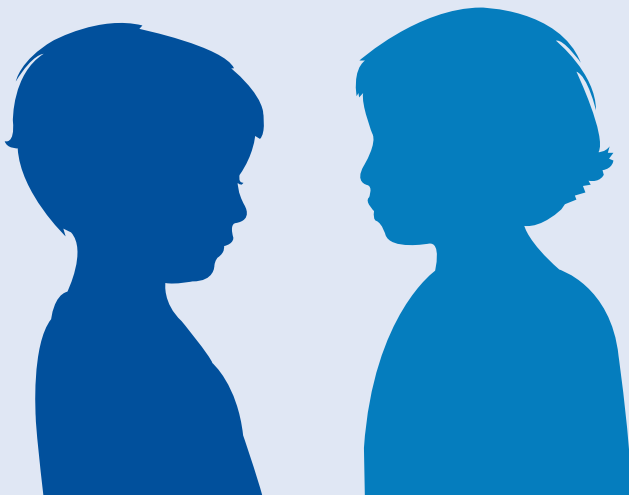
Young siblings' fights are likely to involve aggressive behaviors, such as yelling and hitting. This happens because young children are still developing the skills to communicate effectively and manage their anger and frustration during conflicts. Parents should still stop these behaviors so they don't worsen over time and teach their children better ways to communicate their feelings.

## Understanding When Rivalry and Conflict Go Too Far

**Imbalance** of rivalrous and conflict behavior by one child.

One or both children are **physically or psychologically aggressive**.

Children are **unable to solve** their conflicts or fights.



One or both children have **feelings of resentment, anger, hurt, or mistreatment**.

One or both children **avoid** each other.

One child **dominates or controls** the other.

## Responding to Children's Complaints of Mistreatment

- Find a **calm time** and give your child your full attention. **Listen** without interruption or judgment.
- **Listen to understand** their point of view. Ask clarifying questions, such as “*What exactly happened?*” and “*What do you need?*”
- **Your response is key** — express care, compassion, and understanding to your child.
- Be **honest** and set **realistic expectations** for them and yourself.
- Without shaming or blaming, help your child understand how to **balance** their own and other family members' perspectives and needs.
- Work with your child to **solve problems** in a way that you both feel good about. This could involve coaching your child to resolve conflicts with their sibling independently. Role-playing may help.
- If sibling mistreatment becomes serious, harmful, or even abusive, **consider seeking help** from mental health or health care professionals.
- **Praise** your child for talking with you, and highlight the importance of open communication.



## Common Parent Responses to Sibling Conflict

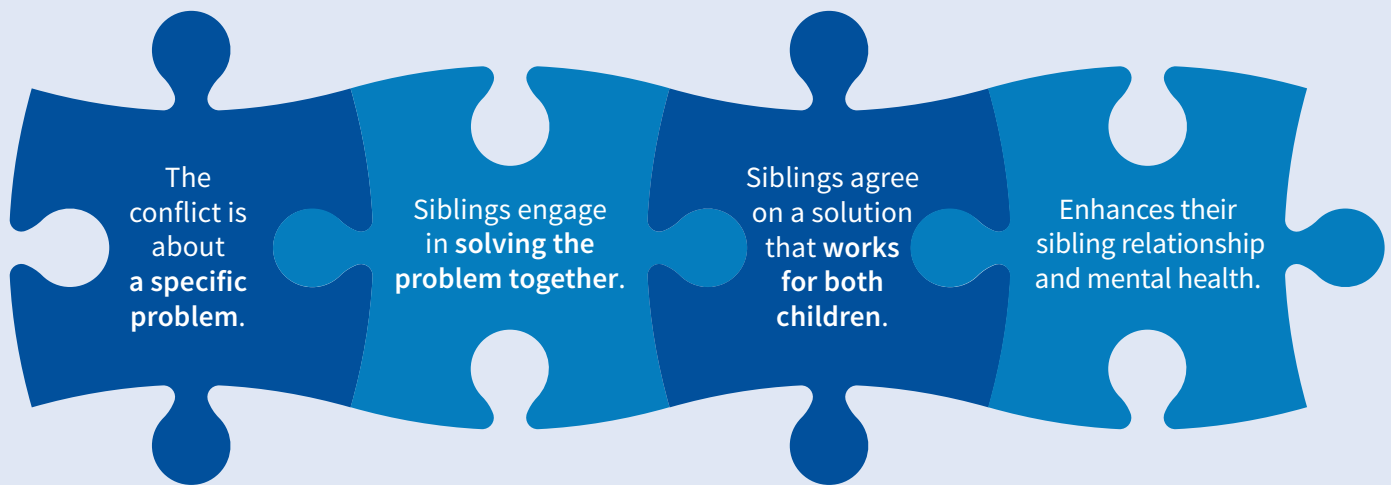
These responses can increase conflicts and aggression because they don't teach the social and emotional skills children need to resolve disputes with siblings and others.

- **Ignoring or minimizing** aggressive or harmful behaviors.
- **Blaming** one or both children as deserving of mistreatment by a sibling (e.g., “*You provoked them*”).
- **Demanding** an apology.
- Characterizing **mistreatment as beneficial** because it makes kids “*tougher*.”
- **Excusing** mistreatment by a sibling (e.g., the sibling is jealous or has a disability like ADHD).
- **Separating** the children without returning to achieve a resolution later.
- **Punishing** one or both children.

## Constructive and Destructive Conflicts: What's the Difference?

Not all conflicts are the same. Constructive conflicts are beneficial to children's social and emotional development. They help bring siblings closer, improve family atmosphere, and prevent future sibling conflicts — but destructive conflicts do not.

### Characteristics of Constructive Sibling Conflicts



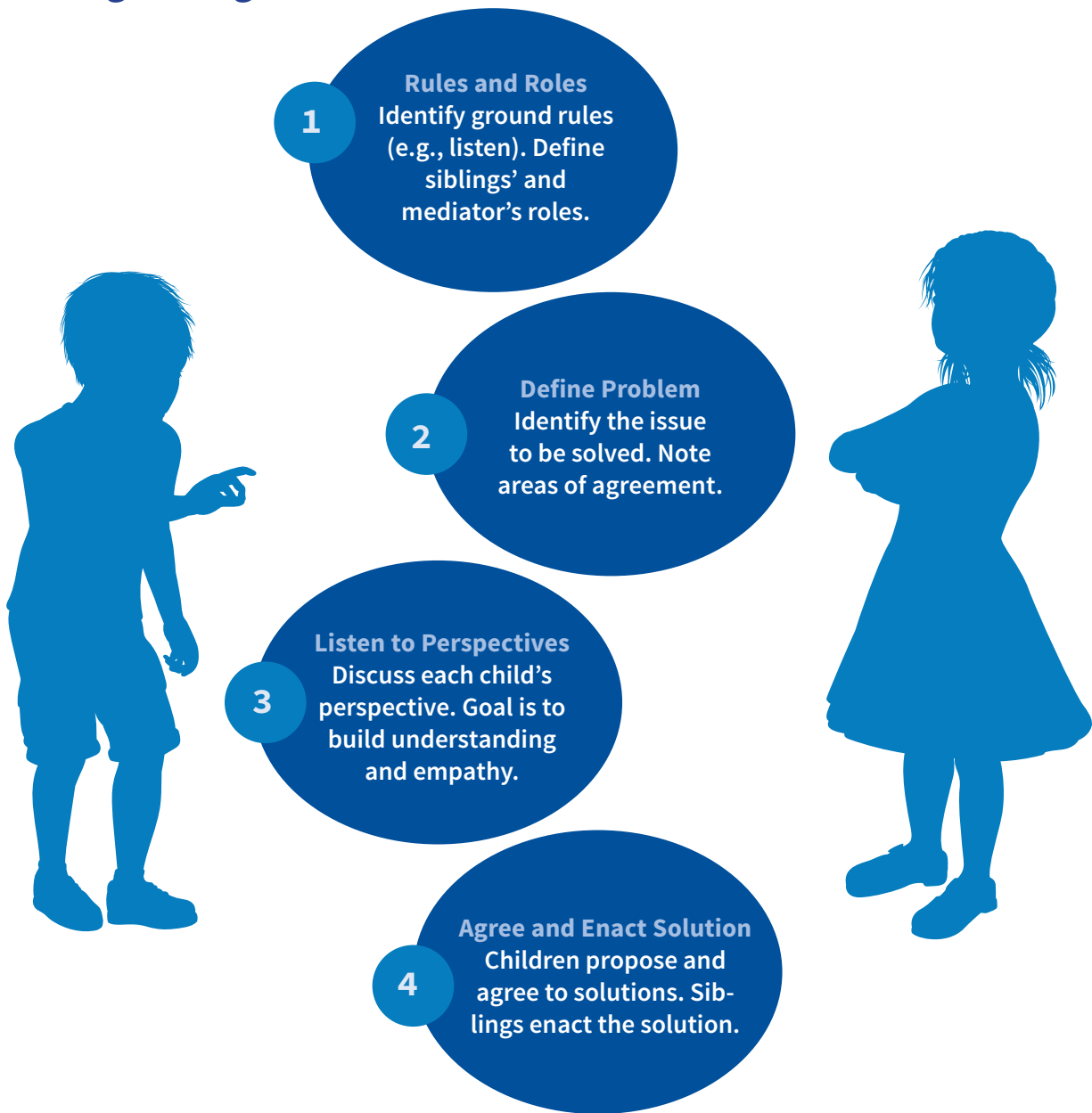
### Teaching Constructive Conflict

Rather than serving as referees in sibling fights, parents can coach their children in resolving conflicts through mediation. This technique encourages constructive conflict, discourages aggression, and helps restore a harmonious home.

Parents can support young children's constructive conflict management skills by encouraging them, being patient, and teaching them how to work with others to solve a problem.

When children are young, they may need help brainstorming solutions to their conflicts. To further support their children's development, parents should also model constructive conflict management and resolution in their own relationships.

## Mediating Sibling Conflicts



### Benefits of Mediation

- Siblings are **empowered** to resolve their conflicts **independently**.
- Parents remain **neutral** and are **not responsible** for resolving their children's problems.
- Children **learn social skills** like listening, patience, perspective-taking, and cooperation.
- Children **learn cognitive skills** such as reasoning and understanding.
- Children **develop a sense of self** through defending their points of view.
- Sibling conflicts become **less frequent**, aggressive, and emotionally intense over time.
- Children learn how to form **lifelong positive relationships** with others, including siblings and friends.

## Characteristics of Destructive Sibling Conflicts

Destructive conflicts typically arise when one or both children have difficulty managing and resolving conflicts. When children lack the skills to resolve conflicts, they can become angry and frustrated, leading them to respond aggressively.

### When this happens, you may see:

- **Insults and shouting**
- **Pleading and lack of cooperation**
- **Lack of listening**
- **Escalation**, including physical aggression



### Tips to De-escalate Destructive Conflicts

- Consider taking a “*time out*” strategy. Give each child a separate space to calm down. Children should take a one-minute break (some may need more time).
- Once tempers cool, engage in mediation to resolve conflicts constructively. You can revisit the problem later and help your children resolve it.
- Adopt “*no hitting*” and “*no insulting*” rules with your children and emphasize the importance of solving problems rather than resorting to harm.

## Sibling Abuse

Although it's difficult to think about, sometimes siblings abuse one another. Abuse is not the same as destructive conflict or sibling rivalry. If aggressive, harmful, or controlling behaviors are one-sided, with one sibling consistently harming another, it may be sibling abuse.

The techniques in this resource pack are not suitable for addressing abuse and will not be effective in stopping it. Parents should always believe the harmed child and seek help from a mental health or medical professional to ensure the safety of every family member.



## Other Resources

Tucker, Corinna Jenkins, Tanya Rouleau Whitworth, and David Finkelhor. (2023). *Resources for professionals and parents to improve sibling relationships*. <https://www.unh.edu/saara/publication/resources-professionals-parents-improve-sibling-relationships>

*The Science of Siblings* blog | Psychology Today – <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-science-of-siblings>

*Sibling Rivalry & Conflict* | SAARA – <https://www.unh.edu/saara/our-work/sibling-rivalry-conflict>

*Sibling Aggression & Abuse* | SAARA – <https://www.unh.edu/saara/our-work/sibling-aggression-abuse>

*Parents & Families* | SAARA – <https://www.unh.edu/saara/resources/parents-families>

Caspi, Jonathan. (2024). *Raising loving siblings: How to stop the fighting and help your kids connect*. Guilford Press.



## Share Your Feedback

Let us know what you think of this resource. We'd love to hear how you used this information and if it was helpful.



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