

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR PARENTS

Helping Siblings Get Along: A Guide to Preventing Childhood Conflict and Aggression



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

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Parenting Siblings

Sibling relationships are unique among family relationships. Young children can't choose their brothers and sisters, yet they spend more time with them than with anyone else, including their parents!

Siblings can annoy and frustrate one another, but they can also offer encouragement and bring joy. When siblings get along well, they develop lifelong, supportive relationships.

Parents and caregivers can help their children develop positive sibling relationships beginning at an early age. Using effective strategies, you can encourage companionship, problem-solving, and teamwork.

Understanding Sibling Dynamics

What makes siblings clash — or connect — can be tied to age, gender, and developmental differences.

Siblings closer in age often form strong bonds, but also experience more conflict and rivalry than siblings with larger age gaps.

Older siblings may develop a mentor-mentee relationship with younger siblings, but may also struggle to find common interests.

Same-gender sibling pairs (e.g., two boys or two girls) typically experience greater conflict and rivalry than opposite-gender pairs. This is because they compete more directly for the same toys, resources, and parental attention.

When one or more siblings has a disability, sibling relationships can be affected in various ways.

- Siblings with a large age gap but similar developmental levels may become close playmates.
- Typically developing siblings may take on caregiving roles.
- Children with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, or other behavioral differences may need extra help getting along with siblings.



What Is Sibling Rivalry?

Sibling rivalry emerges early in childhood, as siblings jockey for attention, resources, and their roles within the family. It often includes jealousy and bickering. Siblings may compete with each other, argue over sharing toys, or compare the amount of attention they receive from their parents. How you respond to this behavior when children are young can set the tone for their lifelong relationship.

Sibling rivalry is normal and usually not harmful. In fact, rivalry can encourage siblings to develop unique interests and skills. However, if rivalry is too intense, persistent, or one-sided, it may lead to aggression.

Parents often find rivalrous behavior frustrating. You may struggle with seemingly endless competitions, appeals for “fairness,” and hurt feelings. Fortunately, there are strategies you can use to reduce rivalry.

Strategies to Reduce Sibling Rivalry

- Celebrate each child’s value and accomplishments equally.
- Notice and praise when children support one another.
- Engage in shared family activities to foster bonding and teamwork.
- Resist labeling children (e.g., “*my math whiz*” or “*my popular child*”).
- Resist comparing children (e.g., “*be more like your sister*”).
- Avoid showing favoritism or taking sides with one child.
- Clarify why siblings are parented differently (e.g., they are different ages, or one has a disability).
- Respond to children’s complaints of unfair treatment by asking, “*What do you need?*”
- Monitor for signs of aggression.



The Upside — and Limits — of Sibling Conflict

Sibling conflict refers to the everyday disagreements, arguments, and tensions that occur between brothers and sisters. It is normal. Even if it's frequent, most conflicts are mild. However, conflicts sometimes involve minor forms of aggression, such as pushing, yelling, or name-calling. This is developmentally appropriate for toddlers and preschoolers, given their limited skills to manage anger and frustration. By age five, these behaviors should decrease.

When siblings experience constructive conflict, they learn to listen, cooperate, understand another's points of view, and manage their emotions. They also learn how to solve problems, consider future possibilities, and experience the consequences of their actions.

Constructive Conflict

Not emotionally intense

About a specific issue

Mutually satisfying resolution

Enhances relationship quality

Promotes social and emotional skills



Destructive Conflict

Emotionally intense

Often escalates

No agreement on the issue

Creates a winner and loser

Unlikely to resolve

Leads to aggression

Strategies to Support Constructive Conflict

Parents play an important role in encouraging constructive conflict and preventing destructive conflict between siblings. Helping children gain these skills will benefit not only their sibling relationships but also their relationships with friends and romantic partners as they grow up.

1

Model respectful conflict resolution, teach children to acknowledge others' viewpoints, and practice finding compromises.

2

Create family rules about aggression, body boundaries, and communication (e.g., “No family member hits another family member,” or “No name-calling”).

3

Use a child-centered approach to teach siblings how to resolve their disagreements without parental intervention (this takes time and practice).





Child-Centered Conflict Management Skills

The key is to **focus on what your children can DO**, rather than **what NOT to DO**, to build a positive sibling relationship.

- **Model emotion regulation.** Stay calm during children's disagreements.
- **Coach children** on how to listen to others' viewpoints.
- Help children **recognize and communicate** about their own and their siblings' emotions.
- Encourage siblings to **problem-solve as a team**.
- **Reward** cooperative behavior to reinforce future positivity.

What If My Children Don't Like Each Other? Or Spend Little Time Together?

- Establish activities for **all family members** to participate in (e.g., playing games).
- Model and encourage **positive ways of connecting** with each child.
- Create and encourage opportunities for your children to **spend time together** and develop shared interests and activities.
- **Notice and praise** children when siblings are supportive of and cooperative with one another.



Set Siblings Up for Success

- **Model** warm and caring interactions with other family members.
- **Teach** children to name and communicate their feelings.
- Help children learn to **recognize how others are feeling**, especially siblings.
- **Encourage** children to find what they like about their siblings and nurture shared interests.
- Give siblings opportunities to engage in **caring acts** together and collaborate on joint tasks.
- Spend **one-on-one time** with each child, ensuring they feel valued and listened to.



Other Resources

SAARA. (2024). *Promoting positive sibling relationships: Practical tips for caregivers*. <https://www.unh.edu/saara/publication/promoting-positive-sibling-relationships-practical-tips-caregivers>

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

Positive Sibling Relationships | SAARA – <https://www.unh.edu/saara/our-work/positive-sibling-relationships>

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

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.



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