

Siblings

Every human wants to feel loved and important. Firstborns usually do until a sibling comes along. Children begin to question, “Am I still important? Loved? Special? Equal?” Children aren’t aware yet that love is infinite. They believe there’s only so much to go around. The rivalry begins as they compete for their parents’ affection. Parents aren’t aware that they play a big role in developing rivalry or friendship between siblings. Conscious effort is needed for parents not to feed the rivalry – set them up for success by taking time to role play new scenarios, remaining neutral, offering equal support, and holding siblings responsible for working on their own relationships.

Facts about sibling conflict

1. Some sibling conflict is normal and healthy.
2. Sibling conflict offers many lessons in the practice of living with others: conflict resolution skills, cooperation, listening to different perspectives, appropriate expression of anger, cooling off, finding solutions that work for all, apologizing, forgiving.
3. Sibling conflict is often about pulling the parents into the middle so they can take a side.

Before a new addition to the family

For a young child who can only focus on their viewpoint, a new baby is often not a happy event. With every sibling added, the entire family dynamic has to readjust. They have to figure out where they fit in now. They can feel “replaced” and resentful. The child now has to share; parents’ and other family members’ love and attention; possibly their room and toys; their baby clothes and furniture; include the sibling in their playtime with friends. Approach with compassion.



This is a huge transition. Try these ideas:

- Before the birth, role-play with your child the arrival of the baby and what the new routine might be like.
- Have no/low expectations of a loving welcome from siblings, which may not happen.
- Ask folks to give attention to siblings, not just the new baby.
- Put the baby down to offer your attention and a lap. In the days ahead, avoid blaming the baby. Say what you can do. “I can help you in 5 mins.” instead of “I can’t right now. I have to change her diaper.”
- Listen to hurt feelings underneath mean things said. “It makes sense you’re upset about the baby. I’ll always love you, while I love your brother too.”
- Deep breaths, extend grace to yourself and your child. It can be common for children to regress developmentally; this phase won’t last forever.

Equal vs. Equitable

You can’t make things equal between siblings at all times. But you can work to be equitable. This means young siblings have fewer responsibilities and lower expectations than older siblings. Older siblings are given extra privileges. These are age-appropriate guidelines. The response to “That’s not fair” is to say, “Yes, things are not equal between people. But it will work out fairly over time.”

Build their skills in the early years

Children six and under will need guidance to gain problem-solving skills. They can't resolve conflict calmly and can become physical quickly. Do not simply "let them work it out."

Steps to build skills:

- 1) Remain neutral with your body language and words.** You don't know who started it. (Does it matter?) "I'm here to help you both."
- 2) Temporarily remove** objects or the children from the sources of conflict.
- 3) May need a cool-off time first.** You can't solve problems when emotions run high.
- 4) Listen to both sides and repeat out loud each other's perspectives.** "You are mad she knocked down your tower. She is mad you won't play with her."
- 5) Go to solutions.** "How can we solve this or fix what happened? Would you like her to rebuild your tower? Let's pick a time you will play with her later."

3 Strategies for Older Siblings in Conflict

Once conflict resolution skills are in place and hitting isn't a pattern, start the practice of "letting them work it out". They are responsible for their relationship. Parents cause harm by getting too involved.



Boot them out - Siblings must leave the room until they are done fighting and have a solution. "I'm not willing to hear this yelling. You know how to resolve and repair. Come back with your solution."

Beat it - You leave the room. "I'm not willing to hear the fighting. I'm leaving. Let me know when you've worked it through. I'll help if you get stuck."

Bear it - Remain present but do not get involved. "I'm not going to get involved since this is between you two. You are skilled at figuring out problems."

Guiding words and actions:

"You can be angry and remain respectful. Try again." "Talk without attacking." "Tell each other your part." "How can you make it right again?"

Build their friendship: create shared experiences / opportunities to work as a team.

Going Deeper

Sibling relationships (including cousins) are uniquely important. It can be the longest relationship in anyone's life. Siblings may or may not be close, but they witness all of the family's joyful moments and dysfunctional patterns.

Siblings provide the first attempt at friendship and can have more influence than parents. Siblings can be a positive role model or they can influence each other down unhealthy paths. They can hurt each other deeply, knowing each other's vulnerable spots.

This relationship is too important to let unfold on its own. Establish a family culture that siblings matter; love and respect are expected and practiced.

Key Points

- Sibling conflict offers valuable lessons.
- Build conflict skills; coach them through the steps.
- Refrain from fixing, solving, or telling them what to do.
- Place the responsibility to resolve problems on them.
- Notice and comment on the successful use of their growing skills.
- Intentionally create shared experiences while also allowing alone time.
- Create a culture where family matters.



Positive Discipline Community Resources
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