

# Sibling Relationships

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator, Bellevue College. <http://bellevuetoddlers.wordpress.com>

## **Benefits of siblings**

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

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

When children go away to daycare or school or summer camp together, they may adapt better. Having the sibling along helps them separate from the parents more easily.

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 does happen with your support.

For the older child: having a younger sibling is a chance to be a mentor and role model, and a chance to practice responsibility. (But DON'T over-burden him or make feel TOO responsible. He should always know that you as the parent are responsible for the children.)

For younger siblings: Younger siblings get dragged along to lots of activities, but that can mean they learn things earlier: soccer, dance, etc. They can read and write and handle 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. start planning for college sooner.)

## **Why siblings fight**

- Having to share their space and possessions all the time, every day.
- Feeling they are getting unequal amounts of your love, or unfair treatment.
- To get your attention.
- 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.
- Because they're there – conflict gets the adrenaline pumping, which can be fun!

## **Setting the stage for positive interaction**

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 the communal possessions and activities, try to have toys and games that work at different levels that they can play with together – open-ended toys like blocks and play-dough are great.

Be fair and equitable. (Note: 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 – maybe a weekly "date" that's all about connecting as individuals.
- There are times only one child can do something 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 to both kids at the same age. (So, if your older child had a 9:00 pm bedtime when he was 12 years old, your younger one should also have a 9:00 pm when she is 12 years old. Even if her big brother is now allowed to stay up later.)
- If you change any of the rules over time because it's the right thing to do (yes, we parents sometimes realize we were unreasonably harsh in the past) 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.

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.

- Encourage them to work together – when we can all have a good day, we all get the reward.

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 "he is our artist and she'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...")

Help your kids find ways to release the day's tensions by sharing them with you or each other rather than by taking them out on each other.

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

### **Managing conflict**

When children fight, it gives us a chance to teach skills like self-calming, being assertive, expressing concerns with words, problem-solving, negotiating, taking turns, and so on.

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 there's an object they're consistently fighting over, you may find it's easiest to just take it away from both of them for a toy timeout.

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 about their sibling, 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 for what he did. I don't think you hate him as a person. But I get that you're really mad right now."

### **A final note about siblings**

You may have one child that's easier for you to like than the other– you have similar temperaments, similar interests – you just understand them better. Gender may also affect this. On good days, we just try to be fair and equitable. If you're really struggling with a child at some point, enlisting another friend or family member who "gets" that child better may help you figure out some new approaches.

Recommended Sources: A Sibling's Bill of Rights:

[www.parentmap.com/zadvertise/coopnews2004mar.pdf](http://www.parentmap.com/zadvertise/coopnews2004mar.pdf)

Sibling Rivalry: <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topics/sibriv.htm>