



HELPING BROTHERS AND SISTERS GET ALONG

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Summertime often means brothers and sisters (siblings) are spending more time together at home, in day care, on outings, and on vacations. Since interactions between siblings often involve quarrels, and these often end up involving parents, it can be helpful to parents to learn more about helping siblings get along together. My own two boys have always had their share of conflicts, too, which helped to convince me to do research on sibling relationships during my graduate school years studying human development and family sciences.

When I started out, I was aware of many recommendations for parenting siblings in the popular parenting books and magazine articles, but these were based entirely on someone's opinion rather than actual studies of sibling relationships among large numbers of families. Although only a small proportion of the research on families has focused on sibling relationships, I did find some helpful information. In this article I will try to pass some of it on to you. I also will share with you the results of my research study involving children in four schools in Oregon.

The Importance of Sibling Relationships

First of all, there is much more to sibling relationships than sibling "rivalry." The sibling relationship is likely to be the longest lasting close family relationship that most of us will ever have. Many siblings get along very well, and are a great source of entertainment and support for each other. Other siblings fight about everything, and greatly increase the level of conflictual interactions in their homes. Children learn a lot from their siblings, both positive and negative, throughout their childhood and often provide support for each other through adulthood and into old age. Furthermore, very poor sibling relationships among the children in a two-parent family may negatively impact marital relationships (and vice versa). The importance of the sibling relationship is not to be underestimated.



Why do some siblings fight so much?

There are a number of reasons why some siblings quarrel more often than others. Research studies have reported the following:

1. When each child has a good relationship with at least one parent, siblings are less likely to express conflict with each other. When each child is getting his or her emotional needs met by a parent, s/he is less likely to harbor anger or resentment toward a sibling, and is more likely to have good social skills and to use them with their siblings.

2. The more parents (whether married or divorced) express conflict with each other openly, the more their children do the same with their siblings. Parents who argue angrily a lot in front of their children are not modeling very positive ways of solving problems, and anger is often contagious. Furthermore, frequent sibling arguments may increase stresses within the family, resulting in more frequent parental quarrels. The combination of these factors may set up a vicious cycle of conflict within families.
3. Children's temperament has been linked to the amount of conflict within families. In a two-child family, if both children have an emotional or active temperament, or if the older child in a family has one, there is likely to be more conflict between siblings than with other temperament combinations.
4. Children whose parents use authoritative or "democratic parenting" tend to get along with each other better than children in other families. Authoritative parenting (where children feel they have a say in family decision-making) models techniques for solving problems that may then be used successfully by children in resolving day-to-day conflicts with their siblings.
5. A number of day-to-day reasons for sibling quarrels have also been referred to by research studies. Siblings may quarrel with each other because:
 - (a) they are bored
 - (b) one wants the other's attention
 - (c) they are arguing over toys, privileges
 - (d) one can get the other in trouble with Mom or Dad
 - (e) one child needs or wants more parental attention
 - (f) one (or more) is expressing excess hostility and resentment
 - (g) one or both children are feeling grumpy.
6. Quarrels and other interactions with siblings help children learn. Having a sibling greatly increases the number of child-to-child interactions children have, and children learn different things from these kinds of experiences than they learn from interactions with adults. Each child is socialized, not only by his/her parents, but also by the other children within the family circle.

One of the ways in which children learn about their place in the family and getting along with others is through their parent's responses to their sibling quarrels.



Responding to Sibling Quarrels

A few years ago, I surveyed several groups of third through fifth-grade children in four different schools. I wanted to find out whether the ways in which parents respond to quarrels between siblings had an effect on certain aspects of their sibling relationships. I asked the children to indicate how often their parents used each of six different types of responses to sibling quarrels. I also asked about specific aspects of their relationships with their siblings.

A number of strong statistical relationships emerged from this data. Children's perceptions about the degrees of emotional Closeness and Conflict (defined as competition, quarreling and antagonism) between the siblings, and their perceptions of Parental Partiality were significantly related to particular ways in which parents responded to their sibling quarrels.

Ignoring Quarrels

Ignoring sibling quarrels is probably the most common popular advice parents receive. However, I found it to be associated with increased sibling Conflict and perceptions of Parental Partiality, particularly for the boys in the study.



Restricting Quarrels

Punishing one or both children, telling one to stop what s/he was doing, and telling both to do something else, all were strongly predictive of more conflict and less warmth between siblings. This may have been partly because these responses did nothing to help children learn ways of solving their problems in future interactions with each other. Unfortunately, these three types of responses were reported by the children to be used most often by parents.

Rules and Problem Solving

Another parental response was referring to family rules. This was a fairly benign response, but seemed to contribute to sibling Conflict in some cases. One way of responding to sibling quarrels was associated with more Warmth and less Conflict between siblings, particularly boys. This was problem solving, i.e., helping siblings talk about the problem and come to an agreement.

For example, I may see Selina grab Shaun's truck away, but may not have seen Shaun ram it into Selina's carefully built castle. It's probably best not to let family rules allow siblings to get each other into trouble, but rather to help siblings figure out how to resolve their problems fairly. In the situation of Selina and Shaun, I could ask them what happened, and give each child a turn to talk. If I didn't have time to help the children solve the problem, I could have reminded each child of the family rule "use your words instead of being mean to each other," and told each child that I expected them to treat each other fairly.

If I did have time to engage the children in problem-solving, I could ask each child how it felt to have the other act so unfairly and what each could do next time instead of being mean to each other. I might want to help Shaun come up with several different ideas about what he could have done to let Selina know he wanted her to play with him instead of wrecking her castle. Then I could ask Selina how she would have felt if Shaun had done that instead. The same process could be applied to Selina and what she could have done instead grabbing Shaun's truck away from him. This process puts the parent in the role of "mediator" instead of "referee" or "judge." This is a process I have used successfully for years with preschool children. Problem solving or mediating a dispute may involve:

1. Setting aside our own ideas about who deserves to "win" the argument, or what the best solution would be for this particular problem. This is probably the hardest part of being a mediator.
2. Helping each child understand what the other is feeling. Help children articulate what each is upset about, and what the whole problem involves.
3. Helping each come up with some ideas about what they could do so that they could both be happy. These don't have to be ideas that make sense to parents. Crazy ideas for solutions help the creative juices start flowing. (Parents can help by suggesting some outlandish ideas, but also need to let children know if some ideas are not acceptable to us as solutions - e.g., building Selina's castle on the kitchen countertop or Selina slapping Shaun's hands).

4. Helping children put their plan into action. Particularly with young children, you may need to monitor their interactions for a time, remind each of their plan, and help them follow it or renegotiate.

Referring to family rules is most likely to be helpful with children who value fairness and justice, and in circumstances where rules can be fairly applied. Referring to family rules can reduce the causes of sibling conflict. For example, once it is decided where each child will sit in the car, enforcing this rule consistently can eliminate sibling quarrels about this issue. When siblings are involved in developing such rules, they are more likely to obey them (although parents will probably have to help enforce the rules from time to time, anyway). Maybe it is Selina's turn to sit in the front seat on Mondays and Thursdays, and Shaun's turn on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Family meetings can be called to review the rules, and discuss desired changes ahead of time. These discussions provide wonderful learning opportunities, build children's problem-solving skills, help children get in the habit of thinking about how a particular behavior might effect someone else, and help siblings get to know and care about each other's feelings. However, it would be unrealistic to suppose that even our best efforts can eliminate sibling quarrels and occasional negative feelings for each other during their childhood. Remember that children may learn quite a lot from sibling conflict, just as they learn a lot from testing the limits we set for them in other areas of life. But we parents can reduce the hurtful consequences and influence the content of what is learned by our children in the process.

The extra time spent in this endeavor is well worth the effort, and may have positive repercussions for the whole family, especially because of the potential for improving the overall climate of interactions within the family. A number of good books offer many more ideas about parenting siblings. My favorites are listed here.

Crary, Elizabeth. (1979). Kids Can Cooperate. Seattle, WA: Parenting Press, Inc.
Dunn, Judy. (1985). Sisters and Brothers. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Faber, Adele, and Mazlish, Elaine. (1987). Siblings Without Rivalry. New York, NY: Avon Books.

