

Sibling Relationships

Part I Siblings, Step-siblings, Half-siblings, and Twins



Siblings are very important to many of us. Almost 80% of children grow up with at least one brother or sister. Even though they may not get along all the time, siblings play very positive roles in each other's lives. Brothers and sisters learn their first lessons about getting along with others from one another. They are friends, playmates, and keepers of secrets. They help one another learn to relate to the outside world. They even protect and watch out for each other.

When brothers and sisters do not get along, their arguments can cause a parent to feel frustrated and angry. Each child also makes different demands on you. Your relationship with one child may lead the other to feel that you are playing favorites.

It may be hard to keep the peace in your family. This brochure offers information that may help you understand why your children get along the way they do, and how you can help them learn to live together in peace.

Why siblings get along the way they do

Many things affect relationships between brothers and sisters.

Some of these are:

- Personality
- Gender
- Age
- Birth order
- Number of years between siblings (spacing)

Personality similarities and differences

Parents often wonder how children growing up in the same home with the same parents can be so different. The fact is that siblings are usually more different than alike.

Two factors affect your children's personalities—nature (what they were born with) and nurture (their experiences). Even though they have the same parents, each child's genetic makeup is different. Their experiences are also not the same. As a result, each child develops his own personality.

Some parents feel it is important to always treat each child the same way. They do not want one child to think they love the other more. Treating your children differently does not have to mean you are playing favorites. Each child is an individual, and you should treat him that way. Doing so is part of what makes each child a unique person. It is a way of showing that you appreciate how special he is.

Age, gender, birth order, and spacing

Your children's ages make a big difference in how you treat them and in how well they get along. For example, you may hug and kiss your toddler more than your school-age child. As a result, your older child may think that you love the younger sibling more. Parents should treat younger children differently than older ones, however. A toddler's needs are not the same as those of a school-age child.

Gender affects your children's relationships with each other, as well. Many parents find that children of different genders tend to get along better than children of the same gender. Siblings of the same sex tend to compete with each other more than they do with opposite-sex siblings.

Birth order and family size also affect how children behave. The experience of an only child is different from that of a child in a larger family. Also, an older child's experience is different from a younger one's: The older child has a younger sibling, while the younger child has an older sibling. A third child has two older siblings, and so on. Because of birth order, family size, and individual experiences, no two children view the family the same way.

How your children are spaced affects how well they get along, too. Children who are less than 2 years apart often have more conflict than children who are spaced further apart. This may be because they compete over the same "turf." You might want to keep this in mind when you are planning your family.

Understanding sibling rivalry

Few things are more upsetting than children who do not get along. No matter how hard you try to keep the peace, your children are likely to fight over toys, pick on or tattle on one another, and tease and criticize each other. You may wonder, "What have I done wrong?" The answer is probably nothing. Sibling rivalry is a natural part of growing up.

Sibling rivalry between children who are under 4 years of age tends to be at its worst when they are less than 3 years apart. This is largely because preschool children still depend on their parents a great deal and have not

Step-siblings and half-siblings

Step-families create another type of sibling rivalry. With current high divorce and remarriage rates, the number of step-siblings and half-siblings is growing. This creates new conflicts. When two families become one, children who barely know each other may all of a sudden share bedrooms and bathrooms. This can cause fights over toys, space, and what to watch on TV. At the same time, children are trying to get used to their parents' new marriage, new step-parents, and maybe a new house. Also, parents may decide to have more children, introducing half-siblings into the family. It is not always an easy adjustment.

Here are some ideas to cut down on problems in step-families and families with half-siblings:

- Do not expect step-siblings to spend all of their time together.
- Each child should spend some time alone with his or her own parent.
- Whenever possible, step-siblings and half-siblings should have their own rooms. If they have to share a room, however, each youngster should have her own toys and other possessions; do not force children to turn all their things into community property.
- If you and your new spouse decide to have a child together, you should be open and honest about it with your older children. Reassure them that your decision to have a child together does not mean you will love them less. Involve them in planning for the new baby as much as possible.
- Both parents should be involved in parenting each child.

made friends or gotten close to other adults yet. Children who are 2 and 3 years old are also very self-centered and have a very hard time sharing their parents with siblings.

Competition between brothers and sisters can heat up as children grow older. It is often at its worst when children are between 8 and 12 years old. Siblings close in age or those who have the same interests tend to compete more.

Sometimes, especially when children are several years apart, the older one accepts and protects the younger sibling. Once the younger one grows and develops more skills and talents, however, the older child may feel “shown up” by the younger one. The older child may feel threatened or embarrassed. He may then begin to compete with the younger child, or become more aggressive toward him. The younger child, too, may become jealous about the privileges his big brother or sister gets as he or she gets older. Though you may think you know, it is often hard to tell which child is causing the problem.

In many cases, the oldest child in the family feels a greater sense of rivalry than the younger ones. A younger child may look up to his older brother or sister, but the oldest child may think his siblings disturb his privacy or threaten his special status in the family.

Preteens and teenagers can pose other problems. Younger children may resent the older ones’ freedoms and privileges, and older ones may resent being asked to watch over their younger siblings. Parents should explain that there are different rules for each child based on age and degree of maturity. Although you will do your best to be fair, things may not always be *equal* for the siblings. Explain to your younger child that he will have the same privileges when he gets older. At the same time, do not make your preteen or teenager take his little brother or sister along everywhere he goes.

What parents can do about sibling rivalry

Here are some tips on managing conflict between your children:

- **Do not compare your children in front of them.** It is natural to notice differences between your children. Just try not to comment on these in front of them. It is easy for a child to think that he is not as good or as loved as his sibling when you compare them. Remember, each child is a special individual. Let each one know that.
- **As much as possible, stay out of your children’s arguments.** You may have to step in and settle a spat between toddlers or preschoolers. For example, if they are arguing over blocks, you might need to split the blocks into piles for each of them. Older children will probably settle an argument peacefully if left alone. If your children try to involve you, explain that they are both responsible for creating the problem and for ending it. Do not take sides. Set guidelines on how your children can disagree and resolve their conflicts. Of course, you must get involved if the situation gets violent. Make sure your children know that you will not stand for such behavior. If there is any reason to suspect that your children may become violent, watch them closely when they are together. Preventing violence is always better than punishing after the fact, which often makes the rivalry worse. Praise your children when they solve their arguments, and reward good behavior.
- **Be fair.** Divide household chores fairly. If you must get involved in your children’s arguments, listen to all sides of the story. Make a “no tattling”

rule. Give children privileges that are right for their ages, and try to be consistent. If you allowed one child to stay up until 9 o’clock at 10 years of age, the other should have the same bedtime when she is 10.

- **Respect your child’s privacy.** When it is necessary to punish or scold, do it with the child alone in a quiet, private place. When possible, do not embarrass one child by scolding him in front of the others. This will only make the other child tease the one you punished.
- **Use regular family meetings for all family members to express their thoughts and feelings, as well as to plan the week’s events. Give positive recognition and rewards (allowances, special privileges).**

Sibling relationships are very special. We form our earliest bonds with our brothers and sisters. No one else shares the same family history. By helping your children learn to value, love and respect their siblings, you are giving them a great gift—the gift of a lifelong friend.

Raising twins

From the very start it is important that you treat your twin babies as individuals. If they are identical, it is easy to treat them as a “package,” giving them the same clothing, toys, and attention. But although they may look alike, emotionally they are very different. In order to grow up happy and secure as individuals, they need you to support their differences.

Identical and fraternal twins compete with each other and depend on each other as they grow. Sometimes one twin acts as the leader and the other the follower. Either way, most twins develop very close relationships early in life simply because they spend so much time with each other.

If you also have other children, your twin newborns may make your older children doubly jealous. Twins need huge amounts of your time and energy, and will get a lot of extra attention from friends, relatives, and strangers on the street. You can help your other children accept this by offering them “double rewards” for helping with the new babies. If you have twin newborns, it is even more important that you spend some very special time alone with the other children, doing their favorite things.

As your twins get a little older, especially if they are identical, they may choose to play only with each other. This may make their other siblings feel left out. To keep the twins from leaving other children out, urge them to play separately with other children. Also, you or their babysitter might play with just one twin, while the other plays with a sibling or friend.

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From your doctor

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