

Esther Jackson Elementary Counseling Corner

Ensuring College and Career Readiness for Every Student

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How to Help Siblings Get Along Coping with conflict and fostering strong bonds

Writer: Hannah Sheldon-Dean

It's no secret that sibling relationships can be tricky. From sharing space to competing for parents' attention, there are plenty of reasons sibling conflicts might break out from time to time.

But as many children's closest peers and earliest playmates, siblings can also be an important source of support and connection. Here are some strategies for keeping the peace between siblings and fostering strong ties that will stick with them long into the future.

Set ground rules

When it comes to managing conflict between siblings, it helps to understand what's at the root of it. "A lot of siblings' fights are about trying to get attention or something tangible, like a toy," says Meg Glick, LMSW, MSEd, a clinical social worker. "Kids fight over limited access to things they want."

One of the best ways to get ahead of this kind of conflict is to set up clear schedules and systems – at a time when everyone is calm. For instance, if your kids always fight over who gets to pick what to watch on TV, you can create a schedule together and post it in a place where everyone can see it. Maybe the kids trade off days or half-hour time slots. You can do the same thing for sharing toys, picking routes on your family walk or even deciding who gets the last goodnight kiss from Mom or Dad.

The same goes for challenges around sharing space. For example, if one child needs to study at a certain time and there's not much space to go around, agree in advance that those hours are quiet time for everyone. Knowing what to expect can help siblings stay calm and manage frustration when they can't have what they want in the moment.

Be specific and age-appropriate

Glick advises parents to use concrete tools to make the rules clear to everyone. What exactly this looks like will depend on your kids' ages, as well as their personalities and learning styles.

For younger kids, timers for turn-taking or clear visual schedules often work well, says Glick. "The idea is that they need a way to anticipate what's coming next."

For older kids, a written contract that everyone collaborates on and signs can give siblings a chance to work together and agree on common goals.

For teenagers, you can often take a more conversational approach to problem-solving. Glick recommends language like: "Hey, we've noticed that you and your sister are having difficulty sharing this space. What are some solutions that you think would be productive?"

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Provide (lots of) positive reinforcement

Once your systems are set, it can take some time to get kids used to following them. During that time, it's essential to reinforce the behavior you want – and avoid focusing too much on the behavior you don't want.

Glick calls this strategy “active ignoring.” “Instead of focusing on the whining and complaining,” she says, “we're really focusing on the times it works: when they're able to calmly turn over the device or give space to their parent to be one-on-one with their sibling.” You might remind your child of the rules or the schedule when they're having trouble sticking to them, but it's best not to spend a lot of time scolding or arguing.

Positive reinforcement doesn't have to be complicated, Glick adds. It might be a reward like extra screen time or a special snack, but it can also be a high five or an enthusiastic “Good job letting your brother have his turn on time!” Especially for younger kids, even small bursts of attention and affirmation from parents can really help siblings follow the rules.

Be open about differences between siblings

It's normal for kids in the same family to have very different stresses, responsibilities and daily routines. It's often easy for kids to point to their siblings and say: “Why do they get different rules? It's not fair!”

The first thing to do in situations like these, Glick says, is to be clear about the difference between “fair” and “equal.” “Try to be open in communicating to your kids what might be different among the siblings, and why that is,” says Glick. If a younger kid is angry that an older sibling gets more screen time, being clear that the older sibling is just doing homework during that extra hour can be a big help. No, the rules might not be the same for each child, but that doesn't mean that the differences are unfair.

This can also be a chance for kids to adapt to the idea that sometimes life isn't fair – maybe one child's school schedule just runs longer each day than the other's, and there's nothing anyone in the family can do to change that.

Clear up roles and responsibilities

One particularly tricky difference between siblings comes up when older kids have more responsibility within the family. Whether it's babysitting younger siblings or getting a job to help cover expenses, these added pressures can be stressful for older siblings.

If your family is in this situation, Glick recommends a few strategies for making sure that the arrangements are meeting everyone's needs:

Define roles clearly. Have an open conversation with everyone about what's expected. Make sure older siblings know what kinds of help you need them to provide (and that you're grateful!) and that younger siblings understand what their siblings are doing.

Set age-appropriate boundaries. Glick emphasizes that if you do need to rely on an older child, it should still be clear what the limits of the responsibility are. “You want to avoid making kids feel like all the responsibility rests on them,” she says. “When should they ask you to step in? What should they handle themselves and how can they get help when they need it?”

Check in often. Especially because teenagers and young adults are often dealing with plenty of stress in their own lives, be sure to keep the conversation open and make space for your older kids to talk with you and get the emotional support they need.



Finally, Glick notes that taking on responsibility at home can actually be an asset for many kids, no matter their age. “It can give them a real sense of confidence and mastery over their environment,” she says. “It helps them feel like they’re doing something to help in such an uncertain situation.” So, don’t assume that helping out with younger siblings will be a burden for older ones – they might find that it’s a source of strength and purpose.

Encourage connection

“Siblings are really the first peer partners for a lot of kids,” says Glick. Taking turns, sharing, resolving conflicts – these are all skills that siblings get lots of practice with, which can be helpful even for older kids.

Glick recommends the following strategies for parents looking to help siblings rely on each other and work as a team:

Praise positive interactions. Just as you might provide positive reinforcement for an individual child’s behavior, you can look for opportunities to praise siblings together. You might say, “I love how you figured out the rules of your game together,” or, “It’s so nice that you’re reading quietly together.”

Promote shared experiences. Any positive experiences that your kids have together now can make for a stronger bond down the road. Whether it’s a family movie night or shared daily walk, build in group activities that everyone enjoys to promote positive feelings between siblings.

Reward teamwork. If your children have a particular shared interest or favorite activity, you can encourage them to work toward goals together. “Maybe there’s a cooking activity, an art project or some other special privilege that they’re all really excited about,” says Glick. You might give them a task to complete together to work toward that reward, so that both the work and the celebration become shared experiences.

Remember, says Glick, kids with siblings are lucky to have someone to lean on and learn from, even though they might not always feel that way. Keeping that in mind can help your kids (and you!) enjoy more harmonious relationships at home.

Retrieved from: <https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-siblings-get-along/>

September Core Curriculum Lessons

Kindergarten - Coping Skills, Bullying

First - Coping Skills, Bullying

Second - Coping Skills, Bullying

Third - Coping Skills, Bullying

Fourth - Coping Skills, Bullying

Fifth- Coping Skills, Bullying

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Spotlight on a Few Components of the EJ Comprehensive Counseling Program

Core Curriculum Classroom Lessons

These classroom lessons adhere to the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) national standards for students (<https://www.schoolcounselor.org/getmedia/7428a787-a452-4abb-afec-d78ec77870cd/Mindsets-Behaviors.pdf>).

Lessons address academic, career, and personal/social domains and are taught a minimum of once a month.

Lunch Bunch

Students in first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades may be invited to eat lunch with the counselor in a small group. The goal is for each student to come once a semester. The purpose of lunch bunch is for students to work on two ASCA standards in a fun and informal setting. Standards worked on during lunch bunch include B-SS 3: Positive relationships with adults to support success and B-SS 1: Effective oral and written communication skills and listening skills. Please click on the link if you prefer that your child not participate in lunch bunch (https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=mLHcDGmBcEu6n9p-O6cAwhGGd-Iy6ZpPIk7Q_7Ak9FpUMDcySERJMFVQSTFYRUYxRzVEUZZLWjRVNS4u).

Small Group Counseling Groups

Small groups will be offered throughout the year. Student participation will be based on needs of students and parent will be sent a permission form. Groups might cover such topics as academic success, impulse control, friendship, resilience, self-control, and self-regulation.

Consultation

Parents may schedule consultation sessions to discuss any concerns about their child with the counselor

