

How to Help Siblings Get Along

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By this point in the [coronavirus crisis](#), you've probably helped your kids work through [sibling conflicts](#) of every shape and size. Between sharing limited space and dealing with stress, it's no wonder that tensions between siblings may be running high. And now, with the days getting shorter and colder weather starting to limit outdoor activities, siblings will likely be spending a lot more time together this winter, too.

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Here are some strategies for keeping the peace between siblings and even encouraging them to make the most of these unique challenges.

Set ground rules

When it comes to managing conflict between siblings, it helps to understand what's at the root of it. "We know that under normal circumstance, 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 at the Child Mind Institute. "Kids fight over limited access to things they want. And right now with everyone cooped up inside the house, this kind of thing is happening more and more."

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 — if one child has a virtual activity with friends planned 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?”

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

Especially right now, your kids might be dealing with very different stresses, responsibilities and daily routines. Maybe one child is attending school in person while another isn’t, or maybe a teenager has the freedom to go out and see friends more often than their little siblings can. With lots of families still spending most of their time together, it can be especially 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 right now might be that older kids have had to take on new responsibilities within the family. With parents spread thin, many older siblings have been babysitting younger siblings, supporting them with schoolwork and helping out around the house more than before.

If your family is in this situation, Glick recommends a few strategies for making sure that the new 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 how their siblings' roles have changed.
- 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 this new 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 already dealing with a lot of stress and uncertainty about 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 additional 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.

Emphasize silver linings

Even though the current situation is stressful for many children, it comes with the potential for real growth and connection between siblings. "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 are getting extra opportunities to practice right now. Even older kids can benefit from collaborating to work through the unique challenges of this moment.

Glick notes that she's seeing a lot of kids building closer relationships with their siblings during the coronavirus crisis. Getting time away from the usual stresses of school and peer groups has made their bonds stronger. "In the absence of distraction, some kids are turning to each to fill that gap in a really positive way," Glick says.

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 living with siblings are lucky right now, even though they might not always feel that way. Even if they can't see friends as much as they want to, they still have a peer to lean on and learn from. Keeping that in mind can help your kids (and you!) get through these difficult days as harmoniously as possible.

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