

Sibling Relationships



Almost 80% of children grow up with at least one brother or sister. Brothers and sisters teach each other how to get along with others. Even if they do not always get along with each other, siblings play very positive roles in each other's lives.

Read on to learn more about how siblings get along the way they do and how you can help them learn to live together in peace.

What is a sibling?

In today's world there are many types of families. Besides the traditional mother-and-father family, children are being raised by grandparents, other relatives, foster parents, single parents, or same-sex parents. As a result, brothers and sisters come in many forms.

Traditional siblings are brothers and sisters with the same mother and father. *Half siblings* share either the same mother or the same father. *Stepsiblings* are brothers and sisters who are not related biologically, but whose parents are married to each other. No matter what type of siblings they are, their relationships with each other are important.

Why siblings get along the way they do

Many things affect relationships between brothers and sisters. Some of these are

Personality. Parents often wonder how children from the same parents growing up in the same home can be so different. In fact, siblings are sometimes more different than alike. Even if siblings are alike in some ways, it is important for parents to recognize the unique personality of each of their children.

Age. Children of different ages behave differently. For example, younger children may fight in more physical ways. As they get older, their fighting may be more like arguments.

Gender. Gender affects relationships as well. Many parents find that children of the same sex compete with each other more than do opposite-sex children.

Family size, spacing, and birth order. No two children view the family the same way. An only child's experience is different from that of a child in a larger family. Children who are less than 2 years apart sometimes have more conflict than children who are spaced further apart.

A new sibling

A new baby brings joys and challenges to a family. Parents are excited but they are also nervous about how their older children will react to the newborn. All sorts of questions come up: How should we tell our older children that they are going to have a baby brother or sister? Will they be jealous of the new baby? How can we help them get along? Children of different ages will react differently to a new baby. Knowing what to expect from each age group will make it easier to handle the changes in your family.

Ages 1 to 2 years

Children of this age will not understand much about what it means to have a new brother or sister. However, let your child hear you talk about the "new baby" and feel your excitement. She may not understand why you are excited, but your attitude will rub off on her and she will feel excited too.

Keep in mind, you may not be able to satisfy the needs of both children all the time—especially not by yourself. If you feel overwhelmed, look to your spouse, other relatives, and friends for support and an extra set of arms.

Other ideas to help prepare your very young child for a new sibling include

- **Look at picture books about a new baby.** At the very least, your child will become familiar with words like "sister," "brother," and "new baby."
- **When the new baby arrives, try to do something special for your older child** to reassure her she is still loved. Some ideas include giving her a special gift; letting her spend some time alone with dad, grandma, or another special adult; or taking her someplace special.

Ages 2 to 4 years

At this age, your child is still very attached to you and does not yet understand how to share you with others. Your child also may be very sensitive to change and may feel threatened by the idea of a new family member. Here are some suggestions that may help ease your preschooler into being a big brother or big sister.

- **Wait a while before telling your preschooler about the baby.** Explain it to your child when you start buying nursery furniture or baby clothes or if he starts asking about mom's growing "stomach." Picture books for preschoolers can be very helpful. So can sibling classes (ask your hospital if it offers them). Try to tell your child before he hears about the new baby from someone else.
- **Be honest.** Explain that the baby will be cute and cuddly but will also cry and take a lot of your time and attention. Also, make sure that your older child knows that it may be a while before he can play with the new baby. Reassure your child that you will love him just as much after the baby is born as you do now.
- **Involve your preschooler in planning for the baby.** This will make him less jealous. Let him shop with you for baby items. Show him his own baby pictures. If you are going to use some of his old baby things, let him play with them a bit before you get them ready for the new baby. Buy your child (boy or girl) a doll so he can take care of "his" baby.
- **Time major changes in your child's routine.** If you can, finish toilet training or switching from a crib to a bed before the baby arrives. If that is not possible, put them off until after the baby is settled in at home. Otherwise, your child may feel overwhelmed by trying to learn new things on top of all the changes caused by the new baby.

- **Expect your child to regress a little.** For example, your toilet-trained child might suddenly start having “accidents,” or he might want to take a bottle. This is normal and is your older child’s way of making sure he still has your love and attention. Instead of telling him to act his age, let him have the attention he needs. Praise him when he acts more grown-up.
- **Prepare your child for when you are in the hospital.** He may be confused when you leave for the hospital. Explain that you will be back with the new baby in a few days.
- **Set aside special time for your older child.** Read, play games, listen to music, or simply talk together. Show him that you love him and want to do things with him. Also, make him feel a part of things by having him cuddle next to you when you feed the baby.
- **Ask family and friends to spend a little time with your older child** when they come to see the new baby. This will help him feel special and not left out of all the excitement. They might also give him a small gift when they bring gifts for the baby.
- **Have your older child spend time with dad.** A new baby presents a great opportunity for fathers to spend time alone with older children.

School-aged children

Children older than 5 years are usually not as threatened by a new baby as younger children are. However, they may resent the attention the new baby gets. To prepare your school-aged child for a new baby,

- **Tell your child what is happening** in language she can understand. Explain what having a new baby means and what changes may affect her—both the good and the not so good.
- **Have your older child help get things ready** for the new baby by fixing up the baby’s room, picking out clothes, or buying diapers.
- **If possible, have your older child come to the hospital** soon after the baby is born so she feels part of the growing family.
- **When you bring the new baby home, make your older child feel that she has a role** to play in caring for the baby. Tell her she can hold the baby, although she must ask you first. Praise her when she is gentle and loving toward the baby.
- **Do not overlook your older child’s needs and activities.** Let her know how much you love her. Make an effort to spend some time alone with her each day; use that as a chance to remind her how special she is.

Stepsiblings and half siblings

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 personal space and other things that they may need to share like toys, clothes, and what to watch on TV. At the same time, children are trying to get used to their parents’ new marriage, new stepparents, 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 stepfamilies and families with half siblings.

- Do not expect stepsiblings to spend all of their time together.
- Each child should spend some time alone with her own parent.

- Whenever possible, stepsiblings and half siblings should have their own rooms. If they have to share a room, each child should have her own toys and other possessions; do not force them to share all their things.
- If you and your new spouse decide to have a child together, you should be open and honest about it with your other 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.

In some blended families, the new parent may find it difficult to discipline the spouse’s children. This may require much family discussion to work out and occasionally even professional help. Of course, you should always feel free to raise your concerns and challenges with your pediatrician.

Managing sibling rivalry

No matter how hard you try to keep the peace, your children are likely to fight over toys, tattle on one another, and tease and criticize each other. Sibling rivalry is a natural part of growing up. Here are some tips on managing conflict between your children.

- **Remember that each child’s needs are different.** Some parents feel it’s important to treat their children the same way. Yet children often complain that things are “not fair” and that they are not receiving what the other sibling gets. Treating your children differently doesn’t mean you are playing favorites. It’s a way of showing that you appreciate how special they are.
- **While it’s natural to notice differences between your children, 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 special. Let each one know that.
- **As much as possible, stay out of your children’s arguments.** While you may have to help younger children find ways to settle their differences, do not take sides. If your children try to involve you, explain that they need to figure out how to get along. Of course, you must get involved if the situation gets violent. Make sure your children know that such behavior is not allowed. 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.** If you must get involved in your children’s arguments, listen to all sides of the story. Also, give children privileges that are right for their ages and try to be consistent. If you allowed one child to stay up until 9:00 pm at 10 years of age, the other should have the same bedtime when he is 10.
- **Respect your child’s privacy.** If it is necessary to punish or scold, do it with the child alone in a quiet, private place. Do not embarrass your child by scolding him in front of the others.
- **Family meetings can be a great way to work out sibling issues.** Some parents find that sharing some of their own experiences about growing up can help too. Just listening to your children can also help. Remember, this is their opportunity to learn about the give-and-take of human relationships.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

Raising twins

From the very start it is important twins are treated as individuals. If they are identical, it is easy to treat them as a package, giving them the same clothing, toys, and attention. But even though they may look alike, emotionally they are very different. Thus, you may wish to consider sending them to different schools or having them enroll in different classrooms in the same school, if possible. 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 twins 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 babies. If you have twin newborns, it is even more important that you spend some 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, set up times when you play with just one twin, while the other plays with a sibling or friend.

From your doctor

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