

How to get siblings to get along: 8 tips

By Laura Amann

We've all dreamed of them. Many of us have actually seen them. But how do we actually raise them? I'm talking about siblings who get along. Those mysterious brothers and sisters who enjoy being together and have each other's back.

There's no magic wand (oh, that there were!) to wave and make our children stop bickering. But there are techniques to encourage a cordial, dare we say, even friendly relationship. After all, your kids will have each other long after you're gone. It's in their best interest to help them appreciate each other while they're young.

And they're never too young to start. Make your children part of your pregnancy by having them feel the kicks or go to the ultrasound with you. Encourage them to be part of the new baby's routine by giving them easy jobs to do like putting on the baby's bib or smoothing the crib sheets.

Jennifer Bright Reich, mother of two young boys, made an effort early on to point out whenever her older son's actions had a positive effect on her younger son. "Look, your song made your brother so happy!" or "Look how you were so funny and now he is smiling!"

Another mom of two, Rebekah Hunter Scott, enforces little rules with her kids to encourage empathy and friendship, including always giving each other hugs when one has hurt the other, holding hands when crossing the street, helping each other retrieve lost toys or bringing each other drinks and snacks. These activities reinforce the idea that they are there to look out for each other and help each other.

One of the greatest gifts of parenthood is seeing your children forge a relationship with each other that is independent of you. And by giving them someone else to play with, you can free up some time for yourself, doing something besides playing another mind-numbing game of Candyland.

1. Don't compare. Nearly all experts agree the number one thing parents can do to help their kids be on good terms is to not pit them against each other. And whatever you do, don't choose a favorite. Beware dreaded phrases such as "Your sister never ..." or "Why can't you do what your brother does?" Jane Isay, author of *Mom Still Likes You Best: The Unfinished Business Between Siblings* (Doubleday, 2010), says that only serves to fuel the competition. "Kids don't blame their parents for the unfairness," she observes, "as much as they grow to resent their brother and sister."

2. Stay out of the way. Try not to get too involved in your kids' arguments, unless there is physical injury or cruel taunting. Learning cooperation and problem-solving is an important skill in life, and one best taught by having to work problems out with siblings. Isay cites one grown woman who remembers.

biting her own arm as a child and then blaming her sister. So don't assume you know what your kids are up to. They may need help resolving a conflict, but try not to take sides. And don't blame the older one for not "knowing better." That puts undue pressure on the oldest child and leads to resentment.

3. Attitude is everything. Don't assume sibling rivalry is a given. Vikki Stark interviewed more than 400 women, teens and girls about their sister relationship for her book, *My Sister, My Self* (McGraw-Hill, 2006). She examined the relationships of what she calls bonded sisters. "I found over and over that sisters who were close came from families who put a lot of emphasis on the relationship," she says. "It was a family culture-you are sisters, you have each other to depend on for life and we expect you to have a close relationship."

Katie Allison Granju, a mom of five kids and author of *Attachment Parenting* (Atria, 1999), has found the best way to build a good sibling relationship is simply to have an unspoken, baseline expectation within the family that siblings will indeed be friends.

"I see some families where the parents are constantly making remarks about sibling rivalry and jealousy, and the mom and dad almost seem to fan the flames of potential sibling 'issues' starting in early childhood," she says. Encouraging your children to view their siblings as close allies brings them together in a fundamental way.

4. Activities and opportunities. Have your kids go to each other's games and activities. Get them involved in one another's lives so they have a better appreciation of who their sibling is. "We go to each other's activities, participate in activities together and we as parents are supportive of each other, as well as our children," says Patricia Walters-Fischer, mother of two. Not only do her children go, but they also offer support, encouraging each other before a big game or performance and offering comfort when things don't go well. Kids don't need to attend every event of their brother's or sister's, but they should know what it's all about.

As a family, play games or be active together-walk the dogs, go for a bike ride or even fly a kite. There's a reason family game night is gaining popularity: It encourages teamwork and a healthy sense of competition. When families spend their time shuttling kids from activity to activity, they lose the sense of being a unit and become instead a group of individuals.

Oak Brook-based psychologist Dr. Mark Sharp finds anything that helps kids identify as a part of the family is particularly helpful. "Family traditions, family rituals, these experiences create a sense of bond. That helps create a shared identity, which helps them feel closer."

And don't forget to let your children be bored together. Boredom often encourages creativity and imagination and sometimes forces siblings to spend time together.

5. Joint chores. Once in a while, give your kids some task they have to share-wash the car, rake leaves or wash and dry the dishes.

Dr. John Duffy, a Chicago-area clinical psychologist and author of the forthcoming book, *The Available Parent*, recalls one family who always assigned co-chores: "Whether it was doing the dishes, walking the dog or taking out the garbage, at least two siblings were involved. In doing this, the parents created a situation in which cooperation was an imperative, and their children have really risen to it."

Isay also remembers growing up and spending summers at a cottage with no running water. She and her brother had to do the dishes every night-getting the water, heating it, washing and drying. They hated every minute of it so they made up songs of protest, which ended up bridging their relationship. It's something they both remember and chuckle about to this day.

6. Conversations. Family meetings allow family members to safely and comfortably talk about problems or conflicts that they have with their brothers or sisters. Everyone should be allowed to speak, and everyone should be expected to listen. It's the perfect time to plan family events, discuss opportunities, resolve conflicts and offer up congratulations.

Throughout the week, look for opportunities to continue to share and encourage each other. Parents shouldn't be shy about divulging their good news, frustrations and accomplishments with their kids. Likewise, kids should be encouraged regularly to talk about their day's events.

7. Vacations. Don't underestimate the value of a family vacation for bringing siblings together. The effects may be temporary, but when kids are out of their comfort zone, away from their friends and forced to spend time together, amazingly, they often enjoy each other.

It doesn't need to be anything elaborate. In fact, a weekend camping trip offers some of the best opportunities for working together, hanging out, having fun and experiencing something new. It also removes the technical gadgets that kids are so used to now.

8. And if that doesn't work ... Alas, for some families, even with the best intentions and actions, nothing works. Their kids seem to enjoy being in a constant state of fighting, tattling and arguing. It may be a tough few years for you, but Isay offers a silver lining: "The fact that they're fighting as kids has no relation to how they will get along as adults."

Modified from: <http://www.chicagoparent.com/magazines/chicago-parent/february-2011/features/how-to-get-siblings-to-get-along>