



Dr. Richard Formica, Ph.D.

LICENSED PSYCHOLOGIST & PARENTING EXPERT
parenting@drrichardformica.com | 201 384-7457

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN DEVELOP HEALTHY SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

“They’re driving me crazy.” “They fight so often. I HATE IT.” “They put each other down. It’s so cruel.” “Can’t they just be nice and get along?” “They can be so rude to each other. It’s awful.” “Is it like this in all families? It’s insane in my home between those kids.”

When I work with patients for psychotherapy or parent counseling, and they already have grown children, I have noticed that one of the things that most fills their hearts with joy is to see their adult children caring for one another, being close, spending time together, laughing together, even creating extended family gatherings. Conversely, one of the things which most pains my patients, something which truly breaks their hearts, is when these parents see their children barely speaking, rarely having contact, or having repeated negative contact filled with jealousy, gossip, resentment and the like.

However, getting to that place, where children have warm, enduring and supportive relationships with each other can feel like trying to slog your way through a war zone. Yet, we must extend every effort to help our children learn to get along, and even enjoy, care for, respect and love each other.

Children who are close and respectful of one another is more than simply heart-warming for parents. It is downright healthy for the children. Research about adult siblings has demonstrated that young adults who have close

relationships with their siblings do much better in life, in careers, and in marriage than those who do not have close relationships with their siblings.

Is there anything at all a parent can do to promote these desired and desirable relationships among their children? Fortunately, yes. Here are a few of the ways my patients and I have discovered as we have explored this complicated arena of parenting and family life:

1. Be very available to each and every kid, not just the ones you find easiest or most responsive. Children are like ivy plants. They need lots of sunshine on them. If there is plenty, they thrive and grow fairly straight. If there is not enough sunshine, the plants will compete for the limited light, even if it means bending themselves out of shape or crowding out a nearby plant's leaves;
2. If you are blessed to be raising children with a partner, bring your spouse strongly into the family mix. Encourage your co-parenting partner to be fully engaged. Don't fall into the trap of "It's my job." Or the dead end of "It's easier to do it myself." Parenting is the job of both parents. And "easier" is not our objective. Our objective is to give children two sources of love and support, and two healthy models for relating.
3. If you are with one child, and a second child needs time, help or attention, ask your spouse to put aside whatever they feel compelled to do and take over with this other child. Two parents giving lots of sunshine to children is a whole lot better than one overburdened parent rushing from child to child;

4. When your co-parent is not available, before you go to the second child who needs you, assure the child you are with that what you and they are doing is important to you and you will return to it in a moment. And then do so.
5. Never, ever compare children. It is very tempting to try to motivate, or even shame, a child by comparing them to a sibling. “Your brother is listening, why can’t you?” “Your sister took the honor classes, why can’t you give it a try?” Honor each child as the person they are. If you compare, sibling rivalry will be magnified enormously.
6. Don’t take sides. Kids are notorious for trying to get their parents to agree that they have been wronged by an older or a younger sibling. Parents get cornered into trying to act like the biblical “wise king and judge” Solomon, asking questions about the facts and then rendering judgment. Don’t Do It. I spend a lot of time with parents helping them work out concrete approaches for their particular sibling pair. But I start with the viewpoint that this is the children’s issue to learn how to work out, either separately or together.
7. Teach sibling communication. Many kids just turn complainingly to their parent to intervene and fix things and make their sibling do right by them. These rescue efforts almost always fail. More importantly, kids learn to complain and to recite grievances to the “judge and jury,” mom or dad. Instead of appointing yourself or letting your children appoint you as the family judge and arbiter, ask the complaining child what their

sibling could do or say which would help them feel better. Then ask their sibling to come and listen, requesting that the complaining child stop complaining and instead put into words what they need now from their sibling. If the “aggrieved and complaining” child does not get what they want or need from their sibling, this is a wonderful opportunity for them to learn “relationship independence.”

8. Teach “relationship independence.” If a child is complaining about their sibling, and wants you to intervene, but their sibling won’t engage in the sibling communication process, what should you do? I would prefer that you help your child learn how to walk away and manage their day without demanding and insisting that the sibling whom they feel “wronged” them apologize and change. In most instances, this moment of “relationship independence” lasts only a very, very short period of time. Typically, the two siblings cool off and resume playing or relating, especially if you have cultivated conditions for joint and frequent positive sibling contact.

9. Emphasize the creation of shared moments of pleasure, fun, and positive experiences between siblings and as a family. Activities such as boardgames, sports, book reading, family movies, family dinner, family singing can all create positive moments of fun and pleasure and are excellent ways to promote sibling bonding. The objective is to create so many positive and rewarding moments between your children that conflicts are utterly outnumbered and easily forgotten in the service of returning to the fun of playing together;

10. Do not impose an “obligation” on children to “honor” their siblings’ activities. If you must bring a child to a sibling’s soccer game because you don’t have a babysitter that is just fine. But do not make them sit there and cheer for or make a fuss about their sibling’s game play. If they enjoy watching the game, that’s great. But if they would rather go on the swings during the game, please accept and encourage that rather than make them dutifully “cheer on” their sibling. They have their own life and their play on the swings is as important to them as the soccer game is to their sibling.

11. Create a “No Fly Zone” related to Disrespectful or Hurtful Actions and Language and enforce very consistently and very vigorously. Many parents who come to me with tales of near-constant sibling sniping and insulting explain that it is impossible to stop these sibling attacks. They tell me that they would be constantly correcting their kids. They tell me their kids won’t listen anyway. They even tell me that their friends explain sibling “meanness” is inevitable and normal. I do not agree. The approach I take is rather simple, though emotionally difficult. I ask parents, as a team, to speak to their children over family dinner. I ask them to explain that it is their responsibility to set the “norms” for their family, based on their values. I encourage parents to explain to their children that one of the values that is dearest to their hearts is *“every family member treating each other with kindness and respect, even when you are mad at them, don’t like them, or don’t like what they are doing.”* I ask parents to then identify a few of the most painful or hurtful types of infractions that are occurring, without naming names. Actions like

“putting someone in the family down, mocking, making fun of, cursing at, demeaning” are all examples of violations of their values. I then ask parents to inform their children that anyone who violates the norm of “use kind and respectful words,” will be asked to separate themselves from the rest of the family until they can return to being “kind and respectful.” These rules apply to both parents, not just to the children.

No matter how much you love your children, and no matter how much money they make when they grow up, if your children do not get along with each other, if they resent or envy one another, if they do not talk regularly because they dislike each other, it will break your heart.

To add to this cautionary note, I have observed that young adults who have never learned to have supportive, respectful relationships with their siblings often have trouble creating positive marriages. They may be unkind and disrespectful far too often. They may be critical and demanding far too often. They may find it difficult to walk away and cool off when their spouse and they fight. They may engage in negative, combative exchanges. None of this promotes a strong and healthy marriage, one of the outcomes every parent wants for their children.

On the other hand, positive sibling relationships are very predictive of healthy childhood development and healthy adult lives. During childhood, happy and respectful sibling relationships make family life so much more pleasant and emotionally rich. Siblings become sources of fun and pleasure and endless play. Older siblings can be a good example to younger brothers and sisters, and can get admiration and appreciation from them in return. Siblings who are

close, including those who fight and compete episodically, become a wonderful source of support in childhood and adolescence. This mutual support continues to grow when siblings become young adults. Learning how to relate well to siblings and developing kind and respectful relationships with one's siblings is the single best preparation I know for developing good adult friendships. And, in my experience, a child who has a warm and connected relationship with his or her parents, and kind and respectful relationships with his or her siblings, is very likely to create a caring and successful marriage.

Richard Formica, Ph.D.
Psychologist and Parenting Expert
Phone: 201 384-7457
Email: parenting@drrichardformica.com