

Sibling Relationships

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Having lots of siblings is like having built-in best friends.

–Kim Kardashian

Learning Objectives:

1. Understand the commonality and diversity of experiences of siblinghood
2. Learn parenting strategies for preparing for new siblings, introducing new siblings, and fostering healthy lifelong sibling relationships
3. Identify strategies to mitigate potential negative mental and physical health consequences of unhealthy sibling relationships

Primary Reference:

1. Hughes C, McHarg G, White N. Sibling influences on prosocial behavior. *Current Opinion in Psychology*. 2019;20: 96-101.
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2352250X17301185>

CASE ONE:

You are seeing 3 year-old Sol O'Child and his parents for their well-child care. Sol has started potty training with some intermittent success. When you ask who lives at home, Mrs. O'Child excitedly states, "Well, it's the three of us now, but we're soon to be four!" Her tone changes as she glances at Sol, "We haven't talked about it with Sol yet. Remember how fussy Sol was as a baby? We're going to have our hands full."

1. **How common is the sibling experience? What are known benefits and harms of siblinghood on development and behavior?**

About 80% of children grow up with at least one sibling. There are many forms of sibling relationships beyond the traditional genealogical definition of siblings, including siblings in grandparent- or other relative-households, foster siblings, step-siblings, half-siblings, and adoptive siblings. Cousins or other family members are equivalent to siblings in many cultures. Co-residence has been found to have a greater impact on sibling relationships than genetic relatedness. When speaking with families, all types of sibling relationships can benefit from anticipatory guidance about siblings.

It may be obvious to say, but no two children are the same, and they can be different from a young age. The first child may have been an excellent sleeper without much fussiness, and the second may be the opposite (or vice versa).

Siblinghood creates both positive opportunities for social and cognitive development as well as the potential to contribute to adjustment problems. Siblings relationships offer opportunities to develop skills in conflict resolution, emotional understanding, and problem solving, which can expand beyond the sibling relationship. However, sibling conflicts can also result in risky behavior and adjustment problems. Sibling conflicts have been associated with school problems, bullying, substance use, and internalizing symptoms. While older siblings can model good behavior, they can also be a "gatekeeper" for deviant behavior.

Studies have also found that having an older sibling is thought to result in slower initial language development, which may be related to hearing less adult-generated speech. The birth of a sibling is also associated with lower subsequent BMI scores in older siblings.

2. **What strategies do you suggest to prepare a child for a new sibling?**

Just as each child is different, each child's reaction to a new sibling may be different as well. Each child has a unique personality, and parents must allow for many different types of reactions.

Healthcare providers can recommend using age-appropriate language to discuss how the baby is growing, how the baby will not be ready to play when he or she is born, and what caring for a baby will be like. Parents can involve the older-sibling-to-be in preparing for the baby, like setting up the nursery. If possible, try to avoid major transitions (like changing sleeping locations or potty training) around the expected delivery time, and let the older-sibling know about the day-of-delivery plans (including childcare). Sibling classes, such as those offered at many hospitals before or around the time of birth, have been found to have little to no long-term effect on the older child's adjustment to the new infant.

It is common for new older siblings to have a range of behaviors when they meet their new sibling, and many of these responses can be normal. Jealousy, ignoring, caring, acting up, and even regression (like worsening potty skills) are all potential reactions. While many of these behaviors can be normal, if there is concern about acting out towards the younger child or significant developmental regression, it may be cause for further workup or interventions.

3. What strategies can you offer families about helping older children to cope with their new sibling?

Transitions with new younger siblings can sometimes be challenging. Evidence is lacking supporting specific interventions to help older siblings cope, but some suggestions include:

- New baby gift - a gift for the older sibling from the new baby. Parents can choose something they know an older sibling will love. This way, the first interaction with the new baby will involve positive feelings and a welcome distraction amid all the excitement.
- Special time - dedicated time (even 10 to 15 minutes) devoted to the older sibling. Every day, set aside 10 minutes of uninterrupted time with the older sibling, where the sibling chooses whatever they want to do with the parent during that time.
- Rewarding and offering thanks when the older sibling "helps" the younger siblings. If an older sibling offers to help (whether they truly are helping or not) with activities like diaper changes, feeding, or reading, let them know how helpful they are being, offering thanks and rewards.
- Involve the baby in "conversations" that affect the sibling - for example, if the baby starts to whine, "tell the baby:" "I'll be with you in a moment, but right now I'm with Sol." This models behavior for the older child, to show that sometimes the baby must wait for the older child, and other times the older child must wait for the baby.
- Special toys - Arrange a box of toys that come out ONLY when feeding the infant (put away after feeding is done). This makes feeding the baby a special time when the older child gets to play with unique toys. Try to change the toys out to keep them a surprise.
- Be sure to enforce clear safety boundaries. Older siblings should have age-appropriate responsibilities. For young children, simply holding a clean diaper or choosing a book can be an appropriate activity. Appropriate supervision and boundaries are important to ensure safety of all family members.

4. What strategies can you suggest for siblings to foster healthy relationships as they continue to grow together?

By encouraging healthy, fun relationships with their children, parents can also help children develop interpersonal, social, and emotional skills. Some practical tips for older children include:

- Encourage teamwork to complete tasks - chores (like setting the table or taking out trash and recycling), homework, and games are all opportunities for more fun and relationship-building.
- Adult role modeling of healthy relationships and behavior - set the tone at home with respectful listening and kindness to exemplify model behavior for all relationships in the family, including for sibling relationships.
- Encourage self-reflection and self-control - Practice "Stop, Think, and Talk" - a useful method of self-control in times of both conflict and cohesion. Encourage siblings to take time to think and then sit down and talk out their emotions and come to their own solution when in conflict or their own point of pride when successfully getting along.

CASE TWO

At your next visit, you see are seeing the Air siblings: 5-year-old Nof and 8-year-old Shay. Their parents report that both are doing great at school but have found it frustrating that they are often fighting over toys at home.

5. What are some of the known effects of sibling aggression and conflict on development and behavior?

Multiple studies have linked sibling bullying risks to internalizing symptoms. A 2014 prospective cohort study found that children who were frequently bullied by siblings were more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems and were more likely to develop depression, anxiety, and self-harm behaviors.

6. What are parenting strategies to help handle sibling conflict?

Siblings may face conflict frequently, and they often fight or argue as a means to get attention from parents.

When possible, allow children to resolve conflicts on their own (but intervene if there are safety concerns). Parents can play a role in active listening, trying to be fair without taking sides and without comparing children to each other. Prevention is always better than punishment; to maintain fairness, establish consistent, age-appropriate rules for children (such as maintaining the same age-based bedtime for all children). Positive reinforcement - such as rewarding children for resolving conflict - can encourage children to continue to resolve their own conflicts. Family meetings can also be a useful tool to help siblings learn how to resolve conflicts and learn more about relationships.

Children may be assigned age-appropriate tasks to help care for younger siblings, but parents should be mindful of sibling relationships, rivalry, and conflict. A study of after-school care found that younger siblings who were cared for by older siblings had lower self-esteem scores than their peers who were not in sibling care. While there are limited additional or follow-up studies, this finding underscores the importance of establishing appropriate adult-care if there are concerns about sibling rivalry or behavior.

CASE THREE

At your final visit of the day, you see 7-year-old Kin, whose father, Mr. Ship, gushes about how wonderfully he is doing helping to take care of his 6-month old brother. "His brother has Down Syndrome," he says, "and Kin has been really great coming to appointments with us." Kin smiles, "I love my brother! Daddy says I'm a great helper!"

7. What advice do you give to parents when a sibling may have special healthcare needs?

A child with special healthcare needs will require extra attention and time from parents, and the impact on a sibling's behavior can be significant. Siblings may face pressures to take on the role of caretaker and may also feel obliged to suppress their own emotions and needs. Studies have found that siblings of children with disabilities are more likely than their peers to have problems with relationships, school functioning, and psychopathological functioning. Studies of families with children with special healthcare needs have found that those from lower socioeconomic statuses, those with fewer resources, and those with more stressful home environments are more likely to have siblings with adjustment problems. Positive family experiences (for example, the child with special healthcare needs learns something new) are associated with sibling prosocial behavior.

It is important to recognize the experience of all children in the household, and use age-appropriate informational tools to help children understand what their siblings with special healthcare needs are experiencing and why. Involving siblings in appointments and some care of the sibling can be appropriate and empowering, but it is also important to allow time and space for each child's own social and emotional development and needs. Remind parents to encourage a sibling's individual interests and to reward his or her independent achievements.

Additional References:

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Resources:

1. Handout on sibling rivalry. <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Sibling-Rivalry.aspx>
2. Information for parents on types of sibling relationships. <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Types-of-Sibling-Relationships.aspx>