

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Sibling Rivalry

Question: My children have trouble getting along. How can I help them?

While it's normal for there to be some sibling rivalry, there is a lot that parents can do to help their children get along. In fact, conflict can be an opportunity for parents to promote the life skill of Perspective Taking, or learning to see another person's point of view. This skill is essential to relating to others and to reducing conflict.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children's understanding of their parents', teachers' and friends' intentions. Children who can take others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Rebecca Saxe of MIT uses fMRI technology to study the brain region used when children think about others' thoughts and feelings. She says:

In order to predict what somebody else is going to do if they know different things than you do, if they believe different things than you do, or if they see different things than you do, you have to be able to step out of your own perspective and step into their perspective.

Another way to say that is, you have to be able to inhibit your own knowledge ... [T]hat's an incredibly important accomplishment, and it's developing a lot, changing a lot, between ages two and six.

1

Help your children learn to understand their sibling's perspective by stepping back and asking questions.

Suggest to your children that they try to pause so they can try to imagine what their sibling might be experiencing.

- Step back. "Before you get angry try to stop and take a breath." "When you feel yourself getting upset, say in your mind STOP and PAUSE."
- Ask questions.
- "What are the things that might be annoying/bothering him or her?"
- "How might he or she be feeling?"
- "What might he or she be thinking?"

They can do this in private or directly ask each other.

2

Share your understanding.

Talk with your children and express what you see as each child's experience in the disagreement. Often this type of communication goes best during a quiet one-on-one time with each child. When you talk about your observations, be open to hearing what your child thinks of your view.

- Does it make sense to him or her?
- Does your child have other ideas about what might be going on?

The important message for both you and your children to keep in mind is that not everyone experiences the same situation in the same way.

3

Use a problem-resolving process.

Larry Aber of New York University has studied the connection between Perspective Taking and aggression and has found that children who can understand others have less of a need to strike or hurt others.

According to Aber, when you help teach your children how to gain perspective on a situation, "you've opened the gate to their using problem-solving skills."

Just as with adults, when children come up with solutions on their own, they're more likely to try to make them succeed. With your children:

- identify the dilemma, problem, or issue;
- determine the goal;
- come up with alternative solutions that might stop a fight or mediate a conflict;
- consider how each solution might work and discuss the pros and cons;
- agree on a solution to try; and
- evaluate the outcome, and if the solution isn't working, try something else.

Through this process, you are helping your children get along better and you are encouraging problem-solving and cooperation—vital skills for navigating the social world.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that you set guidelines on how children can disagree and resolve conflicts. You can have regular family meetings to express thoughts and feelings, as well as to plan the week's events and to give positive recognition. Avoid taking sides on sibling conflicts and/or making comparisons between your children. Each child is unique and has different needs.

In the words of Daniel Stern, a pioneer in the field of child psychiatry, the process of growing up is "learning to BE (or get along) with others."