

Encouraging Siblings to Get Along

Part of the [Sibling Rivalry](#) Series



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Our twins, born just two minutes apart, have looked like "Pete and Repeat" their whole lives. And yet in every other way — from preferences to personalities — they are opposites. Two children, born at the same time to the same parents, and they couldn't be more different.

Mike liked books about the solar system and numbers; Rob loved learning about community helpers and holidays. When playing with friends, Rob made sure no one's feelings were hurt, whereas Mike was overly competitive.

When the boys were toddlers, I remember driving home from church one evening and hearing Robert's sweet little voice say, "Mommy, I want to be just like Jesus!" Before I could even respond, Mike disagreed with him. "Not me," he said firmly. "I want to be like *God*."

As parents, we're faced with the task of helping each of our one-of-a-kind children accept and appreciate the differences in their brothers and sisters.

So how can you help your children value the unique qualities of their siblings?

Consider your example

Model the behavior you expect from your children. Your kids are watching how you handle the stress of living with those who don't think like you or do things the same way you do.

If you're like me, you chose a spouse who's pretty close to the opposite of you. On a day-to-day basis — no matter how much you love that person — the differences can quickly become more annoying than refreshing. This fact gives us an opportunity to model appreciation for how our differences complement one another and make our relationship stronger. For sibling relationships, foster amicable behavior in your children to help create a more harmonious atmosphere in your home.

Focus on strengths

Call attention to unique qualities in each child, especially when those qualities represent a contrast to the strengths of a sibling. Point out the positives in front of other family members whenever you can. You might say, "Sara, you always seem to know when someone needs to hear a joke," or "Sam, it's so great to see how much energy you have!"

Help your children recognize and appreciate the positive side to being different. For example, a highly organized child who prefers a predictable schedule could be a big help when you're deciding what kind of chart or calendar would work best for keeping track of family activities. A creative child who loves spontaneity could help come up with ideas for last-minute family entertainment.

When the boys were younger, we had a family tradition they both loved. At least once a week at bedtime, I'd take turns lying down next to each of them

before tucking them in. I'd ask each one the same question: "Do you know what I like about you?" Then I'd go back over the past few days and remind each boy of what I'd observed. "I like how you shared that toy with your brother and how you opened the door for your grandma and . . ." It was a great time to connect with both boys and share with them how much I loved them, and I was able to affirm their good behavior.

Help resolve conflict

When your children disagree, start your mediation efforts on a positive note: "I know you love keeping toys organized at all times, but your brother enjoys being able to put his toys away *after* he uses them." By telling your child how her strengths are different from her brother's, you are helping her move toward a resolution.

Conflicts often begin when a child feels she's been treated unfairly. She may find it difficult to understand why your expectations may be different for her than for her brother or sister. Let her know that you expect the same outcome of every child, but she and her sibling may have a completely different way of doing what they need to do. Define the outcome you're looking for, and hold the kids accountable. For example: "You and your brother both need to put your toys away when you're finished, but the way you store them doesn't have to be the same."

When you hear one child cry, "That's not fair!" you can discuss with your child whether the end result is the same. Our son Mike, for example, needed to sit at a desk or table in a quiet place to do his homework. It drove him crazy that his brother, Rob, got away with lying on top of the coffee table in the living room listening to music while he did his. But both boys had to prove their way worked for them by handing in their completed homework assignments on time. Mike came to realize that his brother's homework routine didn't work for him.

Teach problem-solving skills

Few things are more annoying than dealing with children who meticulously keep track of each other's behavior and report it to their parents. Although it seems to be a normal part of growing up, being known as a "tattletale" doesn't make a child popular with anyone. In fact, constant tattling can drive a wedge in the sibling relationship. Reinforce to your children the value of overlooking minor faults and mistakes, encouraging them only to report urgent incidents.

Make sure your children know the definition of *urgent*. Questions they may ask themselves to determine if they need a parent's involvement could include: *Is someone hurt? Is this dangerous? Is a rule being broken that may lead to harm?* This can create an awareness of what's tattling and what's not.

If you want to make your children aware of just how much they're tattling on each other, you might want to use tickets as a tangible cue. Each child gets a specific number of tickets. (You can buy the standard roll of tickets at an office supply store or make your own.) Each time a child tattles on his or her sibling, one of the tickets must be surrendered. At the end of the week, offer a reward or special privilege for anyone who turns in unused tickets. This incentive encourages the child to resolve conflict without Mom's and Dad's intervention and to know the difference between minor infractions and unsafe behavior.

In the end, we want our children to have more memories of happy times than of conflict and strife. Although it won't be possible to avoid all conflict, it's worth the effort to foster an appreciation for each other's differences as a foundation for the future.

Our boys are 20 years old now, and they've learned to appreciate how their differences complement each other. During their visits home from college, I love seeing them plan what they're going to do together. Mike coordinates the logistics of the trip, and Rob plans their social engagements. They've learned to appreciate what makes each of them unique, and it's made their

friendship stronger.