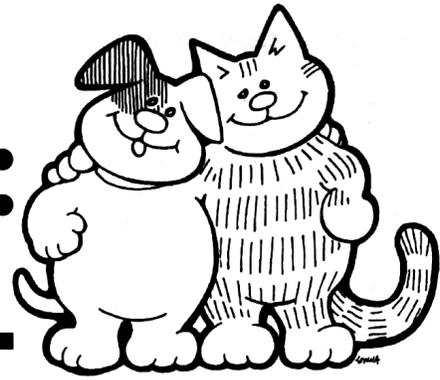


# Getting Along: Brothers and Sisters

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Learning to get along with others is one of the most important lessons that each person learns. For most children their first opportunity for learning how to get along is with brothers and sisters. Family life offers a training ground for developing values of cooperation, honesty, kindness, and tolerance of others.

Learning important social skills takes time. Living with brothers and sisters can give frequent practice in ways to share and resolve conflicts. With the right kind of guidance from parents, family life also can give children practice in learning how to support and nurture others and cooperate with them.

## **Parents are important teachers**

Parents are their children's most important teachers. It takes careful thought and patience to teach young children how to get along. But if a good foundation is laid early on, children will become capable of resolving their differences when they are older. Parents who do their job well in the early years are more able to stay on the sidelines as their children mature. They spend more time coaching than refereeing children.

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## **Children need to know how to**

- say please and thank you,
- share,
- ask for help,
- talk things over with others,
- control their anger, and
- calm themselves.

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## **Consider age and development**

Infants love to watch older siblings. Toddlers enjoy playing alongside others and may try to imitate older children. But it is not until well into age three that children are really ready to play together in a cooperative way.

Four- and five-year-olds love to play with other children and are learning basic lessons about taking turns and sharing. But learning to get along takes many weeks and months. Squabbles and tearful injuries can surface within seconds.

Think about the age of your child and use good judgment. Sometimes it is enough to keep a watchful eye on children while busying yourself with other tasks. At other times you must be prepared to step in and take action. Always be alert for those special moments when you can teach children the skills they need to get along.

## **Establish a few basic rules early on**

Let children know that it is never OK to physically hurt each other. The first time this happens, get down on their level, look them firmly in the eye and say "It is not OK to hit your brother. We do not hurt people in our family. I want you never to do that again." Then teach your child how to make amends by saying he or she is sorry.

Making eye contact and saying your rule with absolute seriousness will convince most children that you mean what you say.

Keep rules simple but clear, and repeat them frequently. Children learn from repetition and will soon learn to quote the rules in times of conflict. Emphasize the idea that these rules are *family* rules. Examples include:

- No hitting, no hurting in our family.
- We help others in our family.
- Ask if you need help.
- Our family uses words to talk about problems.
- In our family, we always ask to use something that belongs to someone else.

## Set the stage for good behavior

Something as simple as changing parts of the home environment can decrease problems with children. Ask yourself the following questions.

- Are there changes we can make in our home that will help prevent fights and squabbles?
- Are there places that encourage togetherness and cooperation?
- Are there places that allow for private time alone?
- Are there enough toys and activities for children of different ages?
- What toys, videos, or computer games might encourage fighting?
- How can we help children understand that some places and things in our home are OK for sharing and some are not?
- How can we make our home more pleasant and peaceable?

Take a room-by-room inventory and look for possible changes that can make life easier and a bit more peaceable.

## When children have their own room

- Help each child make a “Please knock” sign that can be posted on the door.
- Help children personalize their room with pictures and drawings.
- Hang a small bell outside the door that younger children can ring when they want to talk to an older brother or sister.

## When children share a room

- Give each child a shelf or small chest for personal belongings.
- Install extra shelves or organizers in closets.
- Use masking tape on floors, walls, and shelves to identify personal spaces.
- Find a comfortable, private place that a child can use to spend time alone when needed.

## In the bathroom

- Give each child a colorful, plastic container in which he or she can store personal items.
- Provide each child with wash cloths and towels in his or her own color.
- Buy each child his or her own tube of toothpaste.
- Use a toilet paper dispenser that holds several rolls at once.
- Use a timer to limit bathroom dawdlers.

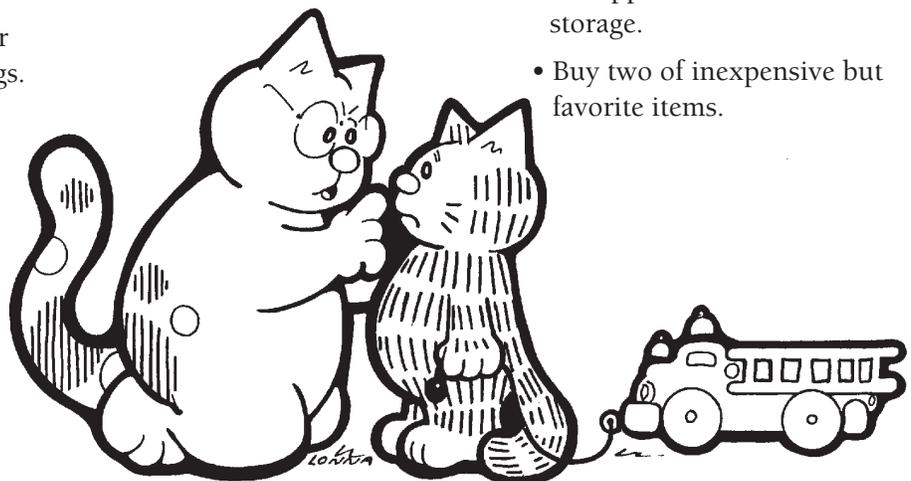
## In the kitchen

- Post a list of chores on the refrigerator. For young children, use pictures or photos instead of words.
- Create a communication center in which the family can leave notes and instructions.

- Showcase children’s artwork or school papers.
- Use photo magnets on the refrigerator of your children playing and working together.

## In play areas

- Select toys and activities that children of different ages can enjoy together. Blocks, dress-up clothes, play dough, puppets, and art supplies such as paper, paint, glue, and stickers are good choices.
- Remove toys, books, videos, and computer games that encourage fighting or violent behavior.
- Color code toys to help young children understand what is personal and what is to be shared. Permanent felt tip markers or colored electrical tape are ideal for this.
- Make it easy to find and pick up toys by providing low shelves and clear plastic containers rather than a toy box.
- Color code shelves so that older children learn to store small, breakable items up high, out of the reach of younger siblings.
- Give each child a small rug or blanket to create his or her own special place to play. When play is over, the rug can be rolled up or slipped under a sofa for easy storage.
- Buy two of inexpensive but favorite items.



## In the living room

- Display pictures of individual children and of brothers and sisters playing and working together cooperatively.
- Keep a sturdy family photo album in an easy-to-get-to place. Family pictures give children a sense of belonging and a strong sense of history.
- Create a cozy place for family discussions.

## All around the house

- Arrange furniture so that running and wild horse play are held to a minimum. Block off wide open spaces with a well-placed sofa. Move the chest away from the back door so it is not always hit when the kids come in from the back yard.
- Avoid a crisis by keeping things that are breakable, valuable, or dangerous out of reach.
- Keep some pleasant, cheerful music on hand to sooth children when tempers begin to flare.
- Make your home appeal to the senses. Provide a few plants and paint walls in pleasing colors.

## Tips from experienced parents

**Start young.** From the beginning let children know that they are expected to treat each other fairly. Let your children know that hurting each other is not OK.

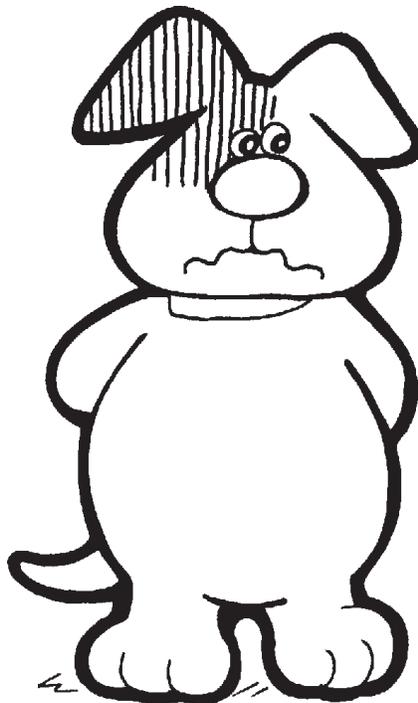
**Take 30 seconds to stop, look, and listen.** This definitely helps you get a better idea of what kids are fighting over. Take the next 30 seconds to think about how you should respond to the situation. Thirty seconds may not seem long, but you will be amazed at how it helps you to keep your cool and take charge in an effective way.

It is OK to treat children differently. The important thing is not to *devalue* one child over the other. Focus on the positives of each child's personality and interests.

**Think cooperation instead of competition.** For example, rather than having children race each other to pick up toys, set a timer and have them race together to beat the clock. Try to find at least one thing every day that kids can work together to accomplish.

**Look for opportunities for children to help each other.** Even very young children can bring diapers, help feed the baby, cuddle a younger one who is upset, or push the stroller.

**Make at least one weekly chore a team effort.** Setting the table, feeding the birds, emptying the dishwasher, and raking leaves are good jobs for learning how to work together.



**Help children to problem solve.** Take the time to help them discuss the problem, brainstorm solutions, and try to work things out. The time you invest early on will save a great deal of time years later because they will become so good at it, they will be able to solve most problems themselves.

**Remember that you are on stage—a real-life stage.** Your kids watch what you do very closely. Show your children how to be patient with each other by talking in a calm voice, giving clear directions, and avoiding angry comments.

**Teach your children what to do when they are angry.** Walk away from the situation, count to ten, go hug a stuffed animal, or ask an adult for help.

**Remember to thank your children for getting along.** “Thanks for helping your sister pick up her toys” or “It’s great to see you two working together to rake leaves.”

**Remember also to remind your children to thank each other.** “I bet Megan would feel good if she heard a thank you for helping you to set the table.”

**Have regular rules and routines so children know what to expect.** Children should know that they are always expected to clean up their toys before bedtime or feed the pet right before dinner. If parents are consistent, children have a better idea about what is needed from them in everyday family life.

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**Consult with children.** When older children continue to fight, sit down with them and ask their advice. Sometimes children can come up with good suggestions for resolving a persistent problem.

**Develop a family motto or slogan.**

Hearing a family motto helps small children feel the security of belonging to a strong family. Say your motto during everyday routine times such as eating dinner, and say it to children when conflict arises. Sample mottos:

- The Jones family is a peaceable family.
- Caring and respect for each and every one.
- Family and friends—together we can.
- Honesty and fairness for all.

## **Books for children about siblings**

Children's books are some of the best teaching tools for families. The following are family favorites:

*A Baby for Max* by Maxwell Knight

*A Baby Sister for Frances* by Russell Hoban

*Baby Sister Says No* by Mercer Mayer

*Big Brother* by Charlotte Zolotow

*Big Sister, Little Sister* by Charlotte Zolotow

*Do You Know What I'll Do?* by Charlotte Zolotow

*Go and Hush the Baby* by Betsy Byars

*I Love My Baby Sister (Most of the Time)* by Elaine Edelman

*Just Me and My Little Brother* by Mercer Mayer

*Just Me and My Little Sister* by Mercer Mayer

*Me Too!* by Mercer Mayer

*Nobody Asked If I Wanted a Baby Sister* by Martha Alexander

*On Mother's Lap* by Ann Herbert Scott

*Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats

*That New Baby* by Sara Bonnett Stein

*The New Baby* by Fred Rogers

*Let Me Tell You about My Baby* by Roslyn Banish

*Walk Home Tired, Billy Jenkins* by Ianthe Thomas

## **References**

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*Perilous Rivalry: When Siblings Become Abusive*, Vernon Wiehe, McMillan, 1991.

*Siblings Without Rivalry*, Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish, W.W. Norton, 1987.