

Fostering Positive Sibling (and Peer) Relationships

We have had several requests for a parent newsletter on fostering positive sibling relationships, but this advice really applies to any peer relationships (cousins, neighbors, classmates, friends). As with any relationship, sibling relationships are a mixture of ups and downs, but with love, patience, and support can become one of the most special, close, and important relationships of a person's life. The following tips, tricks, and advice will hopefully serve to bring more harmony to multi-children households. ☺

Release Expectations

It is easy for parents to fall into the trap of imagining what their child's future might look like, but the fact of the matter is that your children are individuals with their own interests, likes, and dislikes. Just as we cannot predict whether our child will one day be a star lacrosse player or in a band, neither can we predict the relationship siblings might have. As such, releasing any expectations (they are going to be best friends just like my sister and I were, her older brother will be a great protector, etc.) can give space for authentic relationships to form, no matter which shape these relationships take.

Avoid Age-Based Standards

One of the most common mistakes I see in parenting siblings is placing children in younger child/older child roles. This can look like the following:

“He doesn't understand because he is just a baby. Can you be a nice big sister and let him play with your doll?”

“You are older and need to be a role model because your sister is looking up to you.”

Though well intentioned, such statements can have unintended negative consequences. Although most older siblings happily take on a leadership role, any attempt to force it will likely cause resentment. Unequal enforcement of rules or limits will also lead to frustration, and at worst can create a situation in which the older sibling constantly resents the younger sibling for “getting away with” everything while the younger sibling gladly accepts the role of having lesser expectations.

Instead, it is crucial to set consistent limits regardless of age, providing the appropriate developmental support for each child. As in the first example above, if an infant sibling were to grab a toy from an older sibling, I would gently correct the infant (even knowing that they meant no harm and wouldn't understand): “It looks like Hazel was using that doll, Ferdinand. Let's give it back to her and find another toy that she is not using.” Protecting both children equally sets the tone that a limit is a limit and is not flexible depending on age or intention.

Sharing/Toys

In a similar vein, this is a good place for a reminder on the Montessori philosophy around sharing. Many adults mistakenly believe that they must teach their children to share, prompting them to give up their toy or turn on a swing the moment another child expresses interest in it. Not only is this not a developmentally appropriate expectation, it is also not a reflection of the true nature of the world. As an adult I don't get to just take a turn driving someone else's car or wearing their sweater because I demand that they share. In a Montessori approach, children are instead encouraged to wait for a turn when the other child is finished. This might be in a minute or it might not happen that day, but the focus is on allowing each child the space to feel that his work or play is protected from forced sharing. As children experience what it feels like to wait for a turn, they develop natural empathy. As a result, genuine acts of sharing are common and should be celebrated: “Wow, look how happy your brother looks because you gave him a turn with the ball. That is what is called sharing!” By allowing this quality to develop naturally without attempting to force generosity, children are able to develop kind and empathetic relationships.

One more thought about toys: I'm sure most of you have heard me extol the virtues of rotating your child's toys on a low shelf instead of having full access to a toy box, but here is one more plug. Often playrooms or bedrooms become a jumble of “his stuff, my stuff,” but part of the beauty of toy rotation is that you might have a separate shelf or area for each child and then a toy could be rotated to one child's shelf for a bit and then put on the other child's. At least in my house, my older daughter tends to claim ownership over many shared toys because they were hers first. By having separate shelves but rotating the toys between, it sets the tone that it is ok to have separate work at a given time, but many things that are owned in this house are shared. Items that are more personal (e.g. favorite stuffed animals) are not a part of the toy rotation, but have a

separate place in the bedroom, for example. We are also careful to occasionally buy our younger son a birthday gift that we know our older daughter would also really like to provide opportunities for two-way sharing.

Conflict Resolution

When conflicts inevitably arise, put the focus on making amends. Sometimes a well-intentioned effort to redirect or acknowledge the effect one sibling's actions had on the other can inadvertently create negative pattern behaviors. For example, when a child pulls a sibling's hair, we might say something like "It's not okay to pull hair—look, your sister is crying because that hurt." Although it is important for children to understand that their actions impact others, they often get stuck in the moment and don't see a way out. Worse, they may continue the behavior (remember, children test limits as an exploration and learning that pulling hair makes someone cry is still exploring, albeit not the type of learning we'd like to foster). Instead, put the immediate focus on what the child can do to make amends, giving them a clear directive of what to do, not what you wish they hadn't done. For an older child, that might look something like this: "Ouch, I can see that your sister is crying because you pulled her hair. Let's go see if there is something you can do to make her feel better." This slight shift in narrative provides the child with the opportunity to take ownership of their behavior and a clear path forward of how to repair the relationship. For a younger child, we might just model this for them: "Ouch, it looks like it hurt when your sister pulled your hair. I'm so sorry that happened to you. Is there something I can do to make you feel better?"

When resolving a conflict, we also provide an opportunity for the child who was wronged to voice their concerns. Children practice using "I statements" and taking turns talking. We also emphasize letting the child have a say in voicing their needs. This process might look something like this (with plenty of adult support for both parties).

First child names what they didn't like: "I didn't like it when you pulled my hair."

Second child asks how they can make amends "What can I do to make you feel better?"

First child communicates their needs (a hug, an ice pack, space, the other child to say they won't do it again, etc.)

Depending on the child, we may end up modeling most of this process for either or both parties, but with practice children become more independent in their conflict resolution. It is important to start this even with babies so that the older siblings feel like they have an outlet to voice their concerns. If the child can't vocalize their needs, I will often choose for them: "It looks like you would like some space. Why don't you and I go in your room and read a book together" or "If it was me I would probably want him to never pull my hair again. Let's tell him 'please don't do that again.'"

Modeling

Remember that children are constantly observing, and every interaction we have with or in front of our children sets the stage for their future sibling and peer relationships. Model graciousness, empathy, and a willingness to admit to your mistakes, and these same values will become apparent in your children. For example, modeling graciousness (e.g. "I noticed you were really interested in finishing your painting. I helped clean up your train set so that you would have time!") can easily translate into your child being helpful and gracious with their sibling(s).

Recognition for Positive Behaviors

A mentor of mine used to use the phrase "bust them being good." If you want to see a particular behavior, it is important to put the focus on recognizing positive behaviors rather than focusing on the negative. As a general rule of thumb, for each time you have to tell your child "no" try to give positive feedback at least 2-3 times. When we acknowledge the positive (e.g. "I like the way you just walked away when your brother was bothering you" vs. correcting the negative "It's not ok to yell like that") it empowers your child to continue making positive choices.

Quality Time (without guilt)

Spending one-on-one time with each child is an excellent way to build relationships while also giving siblings a break from constantly being together. No need for anything elaborate; even just reading a five minute book in a separate room can be a nice break.

SOMETHING ABOUT PARENT GUILT HERE???

