Fostering Healthy Sibling (and Peer) Relationships

Building strong, healthy relationships between siblings (or any peers, like cousins, friends, and classmates) is an ongoing process. While sibling dynamics can be filled with ups and downs, they can also become some of the most meaningful and lasting bonds in a person's life. Here are some tips to help promote positive, supportive interactions between your children:

Release Expectations

It's natural to have hopes for your children's relationships, but it's important to remember that each child is unique. Just as we can't predict whether our child will be a musician or an athlete, we can't predict the exact nature of their sibling relationships. Instead of imagining they'll become best friends or that the older sibling will always be the protector, let go of these expectations. Allow their relationship to develop naturally, and give them the space to create their own dynamic.

Avoid Age-Based Roles

A common mistake is to assign roles based on age, such as:
- "You're the older sibling—set a good example!"
- "He's just a baby; can you let him play with your toy?"

While the intentions behind these statements are often good, they can create frustration. Older siblings may feel burdened by the expectation to always "set a good example," while younger siblings may feel unfairly treated when rules seem to be applied differently. Instead, focus on setting consistent boundaries for all children, regardless of their age. For example, if a younger sibling grabs a toy from the older one, calmly step in: "Looks like Hazel was using that toy. Let's give it back to her and find something else for you to play with." Treat both children with respect, ensuring that limits are the same for everyone, no matter their age.

Sharing and Toys

In a Montessori approach, the idea of forced sharing is avoided. Children are encouraged to wait for their turn, which teaches patience and empathy. Instead of telling your child to immediately give up a toy because someone else wants it, help them understand the concept of waiting their turn.

For example: "I see your friend wants a turn with the truck. Can you wait until they're done?" This helps children experience what it feels like to wait for their turn, rather than forcing them into sharing before they are ready.

Additionally, rotating toys between siblings can help prevent "mine vs. yours" behavior. Each child can have their own designated shelf for toys, but rotating toys between their shelves teaches that while personal items are respected, many things in the house are shared. Personal items (like a favorite stuffed animal) should be kept separate.

Conflict Resolution
Conflicts will happen. The key is to guide children toward making amends, rather than focusing solely on what they did wrong. When a conflict arises, try to shift the focus toward what the child can do to resolve the situation, instead of just pointing out the problem.

For example, if one child pulls the other's hair, say: "I see your sister is upset because you pulled her hair. Let's see if we can figure out something to make her feel better." This gives the child a clear path forward to repair the relationship and take responsibility for their actions.

For younger children who can't yet fully express themselves, model the behavior for them: "It looks like you're upset because your brother pulled your hair. I'm so sorry that happened to you. What can I do to make it better?" This approach helps all children, even babies, learn how to navigate conflicts in a positive way.

Model Positive Behavior
Children are always watching us. How we interact with others—whether they're family members, friends, or even strangers—affects how children learn to interact with their peers. By modeling behaviors like empathy, kindness, and graciousness, we teach children how to manage their own relationships.

For example, you might say, "I noticed you were really focused on your drawing. I cleaned up the blocks for you so you could have more time to finish," which shows thoughtfulness and cooperation. When children see these behaviors modeled, they're more likely to adopt them in their own interactions.

Praise Positive Behavior
"Bust them being good" is a great way to encourage positive actions. Rather than focusing on what your children did wrong, pay attention to the moments when they behave kindly or cooperatively. When children feel recognized for good behavior, they're more likely to repeat it.

For example, instead of focusing on the moment a child grabs a toy from a sibling, you might say: "I love how you shared your truck with your brother just now. That's so kind!" Acknowledging positive behavior encourages your children to continue making good choices. As a general rule, try to give at least two or three positive acknowledgments for every correction.

Final Thoughts
Building positive sibling and peer relationships takes time and patience. By modeling respect, empathy, and fairness, and by creating a space where both children feel heard and valued, you can help them form strong, healthy connections with each other. These skills will serve them well throughout their lives, not only with their siblings but also with friends, classmates, and peers.

By keeping these principles in mind, you'll help foster positive, loving relationships that will support your children as they grow.