

# The essential ingredients of supportive sibling relationships

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Many moms and dads say the toughest part of parenting is keeping the peace when their kids squabble and bicker. But making an end to conflict your primary focus is a mistake, said Laurie Kramer, a University of Illinois professor of applied family studies and co-editor of a special section of *Child Development Perspectives* devoted to sibling relationships.

Parents should concentrate more on all the positive things they can do to help their children get along, Kramer said in an article she wrote for the special section.

"Even if you're successful at reducing conflict and [antagonism](#), research suggests that you'll probably be left with little positive interaction between siblings. Do you really want your kids to head for their rooms and spend time mainly on their own interests and with their own friends?" she asked.

She urges [parents](#) to think about the relationship they want their kids to have with each other—now and as adults—and to be intentional in helping them create that positive, supportive bond.

"Most parents would like for their kids to be able to talk with each other, have fun together, and be a source of support for each other during stressful times in their lives," she said.

Kramer knows siblings can learn the skills that enable them to be more

supportive brothers and sisters because her own research has demonstrated it. She is the creator of the U of I's extremely successful More Fun with Sisters and Brothers program.

Here are some ways parents can support these positive changes in their own families:

- Help your children learn to see things from their sibling's perspective and to respect other people's points of view.
- Teach them to identify and manage their emotions and behaviors when they're in challenging and frustrating situations.
- Teach your kids not to assume the worst about their sibling's or anyone else's intentions.
- Show them that conflict is a problem that can be solved and teach them how to do it.
- Try to meet each child's unique needs without showing favoritism.
- Teach them to use their unique knowledge of each other to strengthen their bond rather than taking advantage of each other's weaknesses.
- Promote play, conversation, mutual interests, and fun.
- Praise your kids when they help, support, and cooperate with each other.

Kramer encourages parents to examine the goals they have for their

children's current and eventual relationship, and then to take actions that will help their kids achieve those goals.

"If you love the idea of your kids just having fun together, schedule more family activities and help to make that happen. If you do have big problems with fighting among your kids, help them learn and practice strategies for solving problems and managing conflicts," she said.

"Problems have solutions, and there's a logical process that you go through to achieve consensus. Make sure both siblings understand what the fight is about, have them practice telling their own viewpoint and taking the other person's perspective, then help them to brainstorm different ways of solving the problem that have a win-win solution. If the solution doesn't work, well, you try again," she said.

Kramer knows that parents are busy and may believe they don't have time for coaching perspective taking and problem solving.

"Helping your children acquire these skills does take time and energy, but they soon become part of family life. Besides, your efforts will have lasting benefits. Your kids are developing positive ways of dealing with others that will be useful outside the family as well," she said.

There's no doubt that sibling relationships are complicated. [Brothers](#) and sisters who differ in age and temperament often seem to delight in pushing each other's buttons; however, normal sibling relationships actually feature many fluctuations between very positive and very negative behaviors. Kids can even have these opposing feelings simultaneously, she said.

Because children's emotions regarding their siblings are complex and confusing, it's important for parents to be good role models, she added.

"If parents think it's important for people to remain calm during an argument, to talk things out, and try to see the issue from the other person's point of view, they should behave that way with each other and with other adults. Their [kids](#) are watching and learning from those interactions," she said.

**More information:** Katherine J. Conger of the University of California-Davis co-edited the three-article special section, "Perspectives on Sibling Relationships: Advancing Child Development Research," in which Kramer's article appears. The section is part of the current issue of *Child Development Perspectives*.

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