

Reducing sibling rivalry in youth improves later health and well-being

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Sibling conflict represents parents' number one concern and complaint about family life, but a new prevention program—designed and carried out by researchers at Penn State—demonstrates that siblings of elementary-school age can learn to get along. In doing so, they can improve their future health and well-being.

"Negative sibling relationships are strongly linked to aggressive, anti-social and delinquent behaviors, including substance use," said Mark Feinberg, research professor in the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development. "On the other hand, positive [sibling relationships](#) are linked to all kinds of positive adjustment, including improved peer and romantic [relationship quality](#), academic adjustment and success, and positive well being and mental health. With this program, we wanted to help [siblings](#) learn how to manage their conflicts and feel more like a team as a way to improve their well-being and avoid engaging in troublesome behaviors over time."

The researchers recruited 174 families living in both rural and urban areas to participate in the study. Each of the families had one child in the fifth grade and a second child in the second, third or fourth grade. To obtain background information about the families, the researchers collected questionnaire data from the parents, interviewed each of the siblings privately and videotaped family interactions. The team also videotaped the siblings as they planned a party together.

The team also gave a popular book on how to parent siblings to each of

the families—including those in the control and the intervention groups—to see if the intervention would yield benefits above and beyond having access to such a parenting book.

The program—called SIBlings Are Special (SIBS)—was designed by Feinberg; Susan McHale, director of the [Social Science Research Institute](#) at Penn State and professor of human development; and colleagues to improve sibling and [family relationships](#) just prior to older siblings' transition to middle school, which often is marked by increased exposure to and involvement in risky behaviors. The 174 families who participated in the study were randomly assigned to take part in SIBS or to be in a control condition.

The program included a series of 12 afterschool sessions in which the researchers used games, role-playing activities, art activities and discussions to teach small groups of sibling pairs how to communicate in positive ways, how to solve problems, how to come up with win-win solutions and how to see themselves as part of a team rather than as competitors. The program also included three "family fun nights" in which the children had the opportunity to show their parents what they had been doing in the afterschool sessions.

"We found that the siblings who were exposed to the program showed more self-control and social confidence; performed better in school, according to their teachers; and showed fewer internalizing problems, such as depressive symptoms, than the siblings in the control group," said Feinberg.

Not only did the program help the siblings, it helped their parents too.

"The program helped parents use more appropriate strategies for parenting their kids," said Feinberg. "In addition, intervention mothers reported significantly fewer depressive symptoms after the program than

control mothers, perhaps because their kids were doing better and they were less worried about them. No effects of the program were seen for fathers regarding depression."

The results appeared this month in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

How can the team's results be used by parents who are not involved in the study?

"We think that by encouraging siblings to feel like they're part of a team, and by giving them tools to discuss and resolve issues, parents can help their kids develop more positive relationships with each other, which can benefit everyone in the family," said Feinberg. "So, for example, if the kids are fighting over what television channel to watch or whose turn it is, we might suggest that a parent not resolve the issue for them, but instead give them just enough help so that they can calmly discuss and resolve the problem on their own. When siblings come up with their own solutions, they may be more likely to use those solutions again in the future."

Investing in more effort on the front end as a parent by helping siblings learn how to stay calm and discuss and resolve issues will pay off over time, according to Feinberg. "It's an investment in reducing your own stress and enhancing your children's well-being for the future."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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