

Sibling squabbles can lead to depression, anxiety

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Holiday presents will soon be under the tree for millions of adolescents. With those gifts may come sibling squabbles over violations of personal space, such as unwanted borrowing of a fashionable clothing item, or arguments over fairness, such as whose turn it is to play a new video game. Those squabbles represent two specific types of sibling conflict that can have different effects on a youth's emotional health, according to a multi-year study by a University of Missouri psychologist. With these findings, parents can learn how to bring peace to the home and encourage their children's healthy psychological development.

"Our results show that conflicts about violations of personal space and property are associated with greater anxiety and lower self-esteem one year later in life," said Nicole Campione-Barr, MU assistant professor of [psychological science](#) in the College of Arts and Science. "Conflicts over issues of equality and [fairness](#) are correlated to greater depression one year later."

Campione-Barr and her colleagues studied 145 pairs of mostly European-American, middle-class siblings for one year. The average ages for the pairs were 15 and 12 years. The teens rated different topics of possible conflict, noting the frequency and intensity of the arguments. The arguments were organized into two categories: violations of personal domain or conflicts over fairness and equality. The study then examined [correlations](#) among the arguments and teens' reports of [depressed mood](#), anxiety and self-esteem after one year.

"Although parents may be inclined to step in as arbiters, previous research has found that parents' interventions into adolescent sibling conflict can be detrimental," said Campione-Barr. "In concert with those prior findings, we believe our research suggests that setting household rules such as 'knock before entering a sibling's room,' can be the best means for parents to resolve disputes and avoid appearing to play favorites. A calendar of chores and defined time limits for turns with a [video game](#) can help reduce conflicts over fairness. However, if a parent notes that one child consistently gets the short end of the stick, action should be taken to ensure one child isn't being too subordinate. Also, if most sibling interactions become intense conflicts, a family should seek professional help, especially if violence is involved."

Campione-Barr noted that one limitation to her study was that it was largely constrained in its demographic scope to white, middle-class Americans. Other cultures and economic classes may have a different relationshipsdifferent relationships among privacy, fairness and emotional well-being. Although adolescents in some households may not have their own rooms, they still need some degree of respect for [personal space](#) from both parents and siblings. For example, parents and siblings should respect the private nature of children's diaries.

"The next step in our research will be to examine the positive aspects of relationships among adolescent siblings and parents," said Campione-Barr. "Strong, healthy family relationships are immensely beneficial later in life. For example, there are things people will tell their siblings that they would never tell their parents, or possibly even friends. We are currently studying disclosure and levels of trust among parents, siblings and peers."

More information: The study, "Differential associations between domains of sibling conflict and adolescent emotional adjustment," was published in the journal *Child Development*.

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