

# Brothers and sisters learn to build positive relationships in SIBS Program

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Little is known about how sibling relationships impact child and family functioning, but Penn State researchers are beginning to shed light on intervention strategies that can cultivate healthy and supportive sibling relationships.

Parents frequently rank their children's [sibling rivalry](#) and conflict as the number one problem they face in family life.

"In some other cultures, the roles of older and younger, male and female siblings are better defined, and in those more-structured [family relationships](#), there is not much room for bullying and disrespect," said Mark Feinberg, research professor in the Prevention

Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development. "In the United States, and Western culture more generally, there are few guidelines for parents about how to reduce sibling conflict and enhance bonding and solidarity among siblings.

"This is an important issue not only because siblings share a lifetime-long relationship, but also because sibling relations appear to be as important as parenting and peer relations for many aspects of a child's development and well-being."

The SIBlings are Special (SIBS) Program, started by Feinberg and Susan McHale, professor of human development and family studies, addresses relationships between brothers and sisters, which are critical for learning

the life skills that can strengthen a child's development.

Results from a randomized trial across 16 elementary schools in Pennsylvania demonstrated that the program shows promise in promoting healthy [sibling relationships](#), improving family life and enhancing children's social, emotional and academic development. The researchers published their findings in the current issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"What we have learned from testing the SIBS program is laying the groundwork for evidence-based programs designed to prevent sibling problems, as well as to foster mutually beneficial relationships," Feinberg said. SIBS consists of 12 after-school sessions for elementary-aged sibling pairs, as well as monthly family nights. The program focuses on ways siblings can share responsibilities and practice making decisions together. Session topics include negotiating win-win solutions to conflict, setting goals together, finding mutually enjoyable activities and understanding each other's feelings. During the program's three family nights, children show parents what they have learned, and parents learn productive strategies for handling sibling relations—which typically have been ignored by most parenting programs.

"Sibling relationships are the only life-long relationships in most people's lives," Feinberg said. "This makes it especially important that sisters and brothers learn at a young age how to work as a team and support each other."

Researchers observed the sessions and administered questionnaires to both the parents and children. Siblings who entered the study were randomly assigned to receive the afterschool SIBS program or to a control condition. Parents of siblings in both the intervention and the control conditions received a popular book about sibling relationships.

Siblings exposed to the intervention demonstrated more positive interactions, increased self-control and demonstrated greater social competence and academic performance. They also experienced decreases in the impact of internalizing problems, such as depression, shyness and worry.

Researchers found that SIBS also enhanced child-mother relationships. Mothers involved in the SIBS program demonstrated increased use of appropriate [sibling](#) parenting strategies, such as helping resolve conflicts peacefully and encouraging siblings to work problems out by themselves. These mothers also reported lower levels of depression symptoms after the program was completed compared to mothers in the control condition.

"Overall, the results of the SIBS intervention are promising," said McHale. " Brothers and sisters got along better, learned from each other and liked being around each other more. As individuals, siblings in the study were better off emotionally and academically.

Mothers also accrued benefits, with many reporting being happier about their personal and family life." The National Institute on Drug Abuse, as a part of the National Institutes of Health's American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, funded SIBS, which is a part of the Prevention Research Center at Penn State.

"Everyone has personal stories about their siblings," said Feinberg. "Some are good and some are not so good. So it's obviously an important area to study. This program is playing a large role in identifying how to derive the best and longest-lasting benefits from healthy and enjoyable brother and sister relationships."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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