

# My brother's keeper: Study says uninterrupted playtime between siblings is key for learning

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Whether it's how to throw a ball or put together a puzzle, young children learn a lot from their older siblings. While researchers have long known that brothers and sisters teach each other about the world, most of their observations about this have been made in a lab setting.

A new study recently published in the *Journal of Cognition and Development* by Concordia University education professor Nina Howe takes that investigation a step further by observing how [children](#) interact in their [natural habitat](#): their homes.

Through the study, Howe and her colleagues from the Centre for Research in Human Development not only confirm that teaching occurs naturally and spontaneously, but that both older and [younger siblings](#) initiate learning activities. What's more, siblings acting as teachers use a variety of instructional techniques during these informal lessons.

To capture the spontaneous interactions between siblings, members of the research team spent six 90-minute sessions in the households of 39 middle-class families in Canada, each with two parents sharing caretaking responsibilities at home. The researchers observed and recorded interactions between two children, ages four and six, in each home.

The children were encouraged to play together, but not given particular

instructions. Teaching moments included everything from learning to count, to learning how to rub chalk off a blackboard. Typically the older siblings would launch into a teaching moment unasked, although sometimes the younger child requested instructions.

While Howe says she anticipated observing some teaching, these occasions happened even more frequently than expected. "The extent and what would go on surprised us. While it was sometimes brief, it was sometimes quite extended," she says.

"Something else that surprised us was what was being taught," she adds. "Lab experiments often focus on how-to instruction, such as the steps in building a tower of blocks. That's what we call procedural knowledge, which [older children](#) often like to teach."

But in the natural setting, Howe and her colleagues found that younger children are even more likely to ask their older siblings questions related to conceptual knowledge; for instance, how to tell the difference between a circle and a square or how to distinguish the days of the week.

What's the take-home message for mom and dad? Let kids be kids—and don't butt in. Given the extent and frequency of these sibling-to-sibling teaching activities, Howe suggests that parents should see value in providing uninterrupted playtime between their children. "Give them the time and space to interact together, and have things in the home to promote [teaching](#) and learning, both toys and opportunities for kids to be together," she says.

Such uninterrupted time not only takes advantage of the natural sibling bond but also broadens the ways that children learn. "Sometimes people take the point of view that children only learn by being taught directly by adults, but it is evident that they are also learning from each other," says Howe.

Provided by Concordia University

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