

As siblings learn how to resolve conflict, parents pick up a few tips of their own

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When children participated in a program designed to reduce sibling conflict, both parents benefited from a lessening of hostilities on the home front. But mothers experienced a more direct reward. As they viewed the children's sessions in real time on a video monitor and coached the kids at home to respond as they'd been taught, moms found that, like their kids, they were better able to manage their own emotions during stressful moments.

"Parenting more than one child is stressful, and until now, there have been few ways to help parents deal with their own distress when children squabble. Many parents, especially mothers, use how their kids are getting along as a barometer for how well they're doing as a parent. This is true even though virtually all siblings have some conflict," said Laurie Kramer, a University of Illinois professor of applied family studies and co-author of the study.

When children fight with their siblings, they learn important lessons, such as how to settle, negotiate, and compromise. They begin to see conflict as a problem they can solve, said Niyantri Ravindran, a graduate student in Kramer's and Nancy McElwain's laboratories and lead author of the study.

These findings are well established, but what scientists did not yet know was whether parents also benefit when their offspring learn to interact more positively.

The study compared parents of siblings in Kramer's More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program with a control group composed of parents of non-participants. In families participating in the program, parents reported that the intense negative emotions they experience when their children fight were reduced as their children learned to get along better. Importantly, this was true for both mothers and fathers.

The More Fun with Brothers and Sisters program is a five-session intervention that teaches four- to eight-year-olds a set of social and emotional competencies that are important for good sibling relationships. These skills include how to see a problem from a sibling's perspective, how to identify and talk about a wide range of emotions, how to calm themselves when they're experiencing intense feelings, and how to manage conflicts, she said.

The More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program operates on the premise that sibling relationships don't always need to be conflictual—with some work, they can be vastly improved.

"We sometimes have to be very intentional and teach our children how to interact well with each other," Kramer explained. "We can't expect young children to figure out how to manage these complex relationships on their own."

In addition to watching the sessions on a closed circuit TV, parents received a handout after each meeting that described the session's objectives, the words used to describe the relationship skills, and specific suggestions for what parents could say to guide children to manage a conflict using the skills the children have learned.

To encourage families to use the skills at home where they really need them, the researchers sent home lesson-specific bedtime stories, a board game with cards and questions, an activity book, and a CD with a rap

song that summarizes the skills the siblings learned.

It is notable that the study found that not only do [siblings](#) profit from More Fun with Sisters and Brothers, [parents](#) do as well. But why did moms and dads differ in the ways they benefited from the program?

Studies show that fathers and mothers interact with children differently. "Dads tend to get more involved with their kids when they are playing whereas mothers tend to coach their children more," Kramer said.

"As [mothers](#) watched us work on these concepts with their children and did the homework we'd slipped in, they learned some of the same strategies that their children did, and that helped them to better handle their own emotions.

"Mothers appear to have incorporated the skills their children were taught into the way they manage their own emotions. For example, they were significantly more likely to reframe their children's bickering as a normal and manageable part of the sibling relationship and were less likely to let their emotions interfere with being an effective parent," Kramer said.

In contrast, fathers who noticed more warmth between their children following the program were better able to manage their [negative emotions](#) when their children did squabble. This may be because they now felt more confident that their [children](#) would be able to manage any conflict that did erupt as a result of the skills they learned from the program.

"Even though the More Fun with Sisters and Brothers intervention is child-focused, the new study shows that this program can actually help the entire family system," Kramer said.

More information: "Fostering Parents' Emotion Regulation through a Sibling-Focused Experimental Intervention" appears in the June 2015 issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

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