



# Sibling Synergy: Building Healthy Relationships at Home

The past couple years has certainly brought more time at home together—maybe a little too much togetherness for some siblings! However, it's an opportunity to cultivate strong, supportive relationships between your children.

Siblings are not only family but also each other's first peers. While it is completely natural for siblings' relationships to change over time (sometimes even by the hour), the bond between your children is an important foundation of their emotional well-being. They can learn many things about relationships from each other, including how to work through conflict, how to show support, how to show respect and how to appreciate differences.



## Making family time a priority

Because every family is unique and schedules can be challenging, time together can take whatever form works best for your family. Here are some ways you can make family time a priority.

### Enjoy family meals together

Sitting down to eat together once daily goes a long way. Try to make this a screen-free zone (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Adverse-Effects-of-Television-Commercials.aspx>) to encourage conversation and a focus on each other. This is a great opportunity in a relaxed, unpressured environment to vent, to connect, to communicate with each other, to problem-solve together and to share frustrations. This is a wonderful way not only to help guide and direct our kids but to model for our kids how to get along in the world.

If you have trouble getting children to talk about their days, try asking a simple question to start the conversation. Everyone at the table can take turns answering questions such as "What was the best part of your day today?" or "What is one thing you are grateful for today?" No matter how the conversation goes, it will help you touch base with your children and find out how they are doing. Children can learn to take time to listen to each other as well. They may have nothing to say at first. Be patient and keep trying. It may take time to find out what types of questions interest them.

Depending on your children's ages, you can extend this time together into activities both before and after the meal. Consider shopping for groceries, preparing the food, or cleaning up afterward together. Younger children can help pick recipes, rinse fruits and vegetables, and set the table, while older siblings can take a turn at the stove or prepare more difficult ingredients.

### Add game night to your week

Game night can be fun at any age. If your kids struggle with sibling rivalry, pick teamwork-based games or don't keep score. Change games to match your children's interests and strengths.

You can also get creative and create a scavenger hunt or challenge the kids to work together to create a mash-up of multiple games with new rules. You can even take game night online with other family members and friends. For a budget-friendly way to try new board games, many local libraries carry some that can be checked out.

### Seek out family volunteer opportunities

Many organizations have family-based volunteer opportunities. Packaging meals or collecting supplies for those in need are easy ways that you can work together to support local nonprofits. Think about your children's interests. Do they like to draw? Consider making cards for a local senior center. Do you knit? Pass along a stress-relieving skill while knitting baby blankets for a women's shelter. Love animals? Gather materials for a nearby animal shelter. Create

a community service calendar for your family, and let your children each pick a cause to support for a month or a quarter. You are not only teaching your children about the impact of community service but encouraging them to support each other's interests and passions as well. [Back to Top](#)

## Tackle a home project together

Pick a home project that has meaningful tasks for each of your children. Little ones will love to be in charge of gathering supplies, while older children and teens will have the opportunity to learn some hands-on life skills. Set yourself up for a positive experience by making sure to set aside ample time in case someone needs to take a break, so you have time to teach or for that extra trip to the hardware store.

## Take turns choosing activities

Often, our kids' interests vary widely. It can be easy to cater to a younger or less mature child because the other sibling "understands" or has better coping skills. Unfortunately, this can create resentment and doesn't allow kids to develop skills for interacting with other children at school and play. Take turns focusing on activities that each child enjoys.

## Recognize when to let them work it out

No matter how well you model behavior or how many game nights you plan, siblings are going to fight. What kids disagree about will vary by age. A younger child, for example, may get upset when their sibling wants a favorite toy. When they are teens, it may be because someone feels as if their privacy is being ignored.

Learning to disagree respectfully is part of developing effective communication and building coping skills, but children need help along the way. Each child's temperament, maturity, and age play a large role in how they handle disagreements. So when should you get involved as a parent?

With younger siblings, you will need to intervene more often. With toddlers, for example, you will need to consistently repeat simple rules, such as the importance of sharing or not hitting. As your children get older and become more mature, you can lessen your involvement. Always make sure your family's ground rules are clear. This can include not hitting, entering someone's bedroom only with permission, and saying only kind things to each other.

If it is a simple disagreement, give them a chance to solve it on their own, even if they have to keep apart from each other for a while first. During an argument, recognizing when you need time to process is a valuable skill.

If the siblings don't seem able to reach a resolution on their own or you are concerned about a child's well-being, whether physical or emotional, step in as a calm, neutral party. Do your best to listen fairly before making any decisions. Even if you know someone is at fault, taking the time to listen and to remain calm reinforces their own behavior in the future.

## Create one-on-one time

While time together as a family is important, one-on-one time with each child is important too. Try fitting it into your daily routines, such as during a nightly chat at bedtime, or each child can take turns walking the dog with you. If time allows, schedule special activities such as a monthly breakfast alone or a quarterly afternoon with an activity of their choice. These are times for you to truly tune in to them and for your child to know they have your full attention—without the distraction of their siblings—and to know their thoughts are important to you. Special time also gives you as the parent an opportunity to more fully enjoy your children and to appreciate their voices, humor, and interests without distractions.

Keep in mind, how our kids interact begins with how we as parents interact with our families. By being mindful of our actions, we can help our kids develop strong, lifelong relationships with their siblings that are built on respect, understanding, and appreciation of their unique personalities.

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