

National Expert on Siblings, Professor, and CEHS Associate Dean Shawn Whiteman Provides Perspective on Sibling Rivalry

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National sibling expert Shawn Whiteman

Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and Associate Dean in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services Shawn Whiteman has spent the past 25 years researching the relationships between siblings. His work has been supported by the National Institutes of Health and published in numerous journals focused on adolescent development, family relationships, and addiction.

“Sibling rivalry — where siblings compete, argue and vie for parental attention — is common in nearly every family. It can manifest in various ways, including verbal disputes, physical fights, jealousy or resentment,” says Whiteman. “While a certain level of rivalry is normal, prolonged or intense conflict can affect the family dynamics and children’s wellbeing. This type of conflict can even feel like bullying to a child.”

Critically, research indicates that sibling bullying is linked to a lower sense of self-esteem and life satisfaction in young adults. In fact, when bullied by a sibling, the risk of self-harm and depression in early adulthood is doubled. Importantly, the effects of sibling bullying on wellbeing are as strong as bullying from peers.

Because of this, it is essential to understand the underlying causes of sibling rivalry. Some include:

Parental attention. Siblings often compete for attention from family members, including parents. Perceptions of differential attention and treatment can lead to jealousy and rivalry between siblings.

Individual differences. Differences in age, personality and interests can cause friction. As children discover their own interests and talents, they may want to appear unlike their siblings by participating in different sports and activities.

Feelings of unfairness. Children are highly sensitive to fairness and can have deep feelings about any treatment they perceive as unfair or unequal.

Sensing parental comparison. Explicit and implicit comparisons to siblings can foster resentment and competition.

Consider these strategies to help manage sibling rivalry.

1. **Spend time and provide attention.** Ensure that each child receives individual attention and feels valued. Spend quality time with each child, focusing on their interests and needs.
2. **Explain differences in treatment.** Differential treatment is inevitable and expected. Rather than suggesting equal treatment at all times, it is important to provide reasoning for differential treatment when it occurs. Research indicates that when differential treatment is explained and perceived as fair, it is not associated with negative outcomes.
3. **Teach conflict resolution skills.** Teach children how to resolve conflicts constructively. Encourage them to express their feelings, listen to each other, and find mutually acceptable solutions. It is often important for siblings to solve their disagreements without parental intervention. Demonstrate healthy conflict resolution and cooperation in your own interactions. Children often mimic their parent’s behavior.
4. **Do not allow physical aggression.** Establish rules forbidding physical aggression between siblings. Violence between siblings is associated with poorer mental and physical health. Verbal and emotional aggression should also be off-limits.
5. **Avoid comparisons.** Avoid directly comparing your children, such as “Why can’t you be more like your brother/sister?” Also, avoid labeling, such as “the funny one,” “the smart one” or “the quiet one.”

Comparisons can promote anger, jealousy and resentment. Highlight each child's unique strengths and achievements.

6. **Determine family rules:** Establish clear rules for acceptable behavior and conflict resolution. Ensure that rules fit each child's age and level of understanding and that general rules are applied equally. Consistent enforcement helps children understand boundaries.
7. **Provide positive reinforcement.** Positive reinforcement can go a long way to encourage harmonious relationships. Praise cooperative behavior and teamwork among siblings.
8. **Spend time together as a family.** Hold game nights or go on outings. Let each child take a turn choosing a game or an activity so everyone feels their choices matter and are valued.
9. **Seek professional help if it becomes necessary.** If sibling rivalry becomes an ongoing challenge or becomes increasingly intense, seek help from a family therapist or counselor.

Sibling rivalry is a natural part of growing up, and it can be managed effectively with the right strategies. By fostering a supportive and fair environment, teaching conflict resolution skills and explaining differences in treatment, parents can help children build strong, positive and lasting relationships with their siblings.

Whiteman's work on sibling dynamics also recently has been recognized on today.com, National Public Radio's (NPR) Morning Edition, and the *Atlantic*.

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