

Five Tips to Encourage Siblings without Rivalry

Many years ago, while still pregnant with my second child, I read the book Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. I thought it might be a bit early to worry about sibling rivalry while I was still only pregnant, but it turned out to be the best thing I ever did.

The time to think about how to deal with sibling rivalry is not in the middle of a battle between your 10 and 12 year old kids. Being armed with the information early lets you set groundwork for when it will really matter later on. I no longer remember the specifics of that book, but the messages stayed with me every step of the way as I parented my two girls who are 19 months apart.



Since people always seem to comment on how connected my kids are and how they get along so well I thought I'd share my top tips for encouraging the most positive sibling relationship possible.

1. Try not to be the referee and let them work it out.

This is harder now that they are 6 1/2 and 8, but we still stick to this as much as possible. As soon as I hear that whine of "Mooom" I nip it right there before it gets farther than "She ____." I tell them to discuss it and sort it out between them. Since one of our house rules is "hands and feet to yourself," they have no choice but to talk it out and negotiate.

When they were little this mostly meant hanging back when I heard a squabble and seeing where it went before intervening. Often, even as preschoolers, they resolved it themselves. I think this reinforced the idea that they had it in them to work through things together.

2. Discourage tattling.

Unless someone is in danger, bleeding, or ignoring our most important house rule ("No/stop means stop immediately") we parents do not need to be involved. This works to build up trust between the two kids rather than encouraging brownie points for being the "good" one. My 6yr old is still learning this one. She can occasionally be heard saying things like, "Alice, why are you ____?" within earshot of me in the hopes I will react and get mad at her sister. Instead of thanking her for letting me know of this awful "crime" I put the focus back on that it is more important for her to be loyal to her sister than to let me know she is picking her nose or has her shoes on the sofa.

3. Don't compare them.

We always aim to treat them as individuals. It does not matter if one is a great sleeper, student or rule follower. Holding up the other child as an example is more likely to push the sibling further away rather than encourage them to be just like their sister or brother. I doubt any child has ever heard "why can't you be more _____ like your sister" and actually been motivated positively.

We take this further and also discourage others from labelling or comparing our kids in front of them. Positive or negative, it is limiting and encourages comparisons. They can both like and practice art even if one is slightly more talented than the other. Calling only one an "artist" does not allow for the other's possible natural improvement or valuing her efforts equally. I'm not talking about pretending a child is better at something than he is, but simply avoiding limiting language like when people say "Charlie is the athlete of the family" which implies the other children are not athletes and so on.

4. Unite them as a team.

This one I definitely gained from the book and have worked hard to keep alive even when the opposite is tempting. Often I hear people say they use competition to push their kids to get things done. “Let’s see who can get ready for school and in the car first” or “Who is going to finish their broccoli first and get dessert?”

In our house we encourage the kids to be a united team. They work together so both achieve the goal. If they are pitted against anyone it will be them against Mom and Dad. They view each other as “on their side” and their closest ally, rather than someone they are playing against in all areas of life. You can still race to the car, but how about saying “I bet I can get ready before you guys – I’ll see you at the car”. Suddenly they are working to get their team over the line and that might mean big sister helping little sister tie her shoes or saying “I’ll get your bag while you put on your shoes”.

5. Encourage their friendship as the most important in their life.

Following on from being a team, we emphasize that their sister is the most important person in their life. Mom and Dad are older and will eventually be gone. They will want to be there for each other always. Choose your sister over a friend (which means they include them in games rather than pushing them aside), share what you have with each other, be considerate of her feelings, look out for each other on the school playground. Through all this they have developed a bond that we hope will hold them together as they grow older. Puberty, boyfriends, distance will always come up as a potential divider. We are laying the groundwork now to help them work through those times.

I know that there are so many factors that go into sibling relationships – from their age difference to gender and family size and more. These are just 5 things we have done that I believe had the greatest influence in our home. We still have typical age-appropriate bickering and fighting, but I have been told by others that it is much less in my house than theirs. Things are worse when the little people are tired or have had a long and busy school period – there is a warning that we are nearing the end of a term as the squabbles multiply daily. We then try to find the balance between alone time and family time to both regroup and connect.

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