

Experts are **discovering** the numerous **benefits** of the **sibling relationship**—and that even **rivalry** has its **advantages**.

by Melinda Blau

Siblings: The Greatest Love of All?

Wendy Tanner* was in kindergarten when she had to have her tonsils removed. As she was coming out of the anesthesia, recalls her mother, Julianne, the first person she asked for was her 8-year-old sister, Chrissy. "It was clear to me from that day on that my girls have a certain connection that I don't have with either of them," says Tanner.

The girls have always been close; Chrissy was the first to make Wendy smile. But this Denver mother suspects that her daughters' bond has intensified over the years because she and her husband both work full-time; she is a public relations executive, he's a psychiatrist. "They have come to rely on each other, to take care of each other," says Tanner. "Their connection is constant and consistent."

For years, experts believed that parents were the most important influence on a child's development. But now they're learning that siblings wield just as much power over each other's social, emotional, and intellec-



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tual development. And sometimes they are even more important than parents. "Siblings understand each other as children, which adults cannot," points out Yudit Jung, Ph.D., a New York City psychoanalyst. "They know how to comfort each other in ways that parents can't."

This new understanding of siblinghood comes at a critical time in the history of family life. A preponderance of dual-career families, single-parent families, and stepfamilies means that parents' schedules are more complicated than they

ever have been and that children are often shuttled from place to place and person to person. "It's no wonder that so many of today's kids turn to a sibling for the contact and constancy they crave," says Dr. Jung.

Indeed, according to one long-term study of siblings, today's high-pressured family climate intensifies the sibling bond. "We found that brothers and sisters became closer in the face of all kinds of family stress, including unemployment and illness," says Judith Dunn, Ph.D., director of the Center for The Study of Child and Adolescent Development at Pennsylvania State University at State College and author of *From One Child to Two*.

What's more, although parents of-

**Some parents' and children's names have been changed.*

5 Mistakes Parents Make When Sibs Fight

1. **Giving vague warnings.** Admonitions like "Be nice" don't give kids direction. Instead, remind your child of a specific rule.
2. **Overreacting.** Control your urge to yell, and give kids older than 3 or 4 a chance to work things out for themselves.
3. **Waiting too long to separate warring children.** If kids are being physically or verbally abusive, send them to their rooms or to different parts of the house to think about a solution.
4. **Overprotecting your younger child.** It takes two kids to fight. Ask each one what happened, then let the negotiations begin.
5. **Disagreeing about discipline.** If parents clash about rules in front of children, kids get confusing messages and may never learn how to settle fights. Present a united front.

A younger sibling can be a sounding board for an older child's ideas and can provide a fresh perspective.

ten worry about sibling rivalry, it seems that even discord can be a boon to kids' mental and emotional development. Hang in there; ultimately, siblings can bring out the best in one another.

An Emotional, Educational Bond

The sibling connection is formed at a very young age. Dr. Dunn's research reveals that well before the age of 3, children are "skillful at reading and responding to the feelings and plans of siblings." Studies show that babies as young as 4 months old can develop a rapport with their big brothers and sisters; by 8 or 10 months, begin to play with them; and by 14 months, anticipate their actions. These interactions provide a wealth of benefits for both siblings in many areas, including the following:

Language and communication

Like many parents, Tanner recalls a "preverbal connection" between her girls, three years apart. "An older child making goo-goo eyes at the baby is actually conversing," says Dr. Dunn. His facial expressions stimulate the baby and help her learn to make eye contact. Over time, these conversations become longer and more intricate, and often a child's first words are the direct result of an older brother or sister's persistence.

Intelligence Stephanie Roberts of Cleveland says her 15-year-old son, Sam, is a "constant source of information" for his sister, Jessica, 8. "She's always asking, 'What's this? What's that?' I may be too busy to answer her, but he—sometimes grumpily—explains everything to her. It's like having her own encyclopedia!"

Although it seems obvious that younger kids can benefit intellectually from having older siblings around, this, too, can be a reciprocal process.

Research indicates that children make dramatic leaps in learning when they figure out answers to problems with another child—even if that child is less advanced intellectually. A younger sibling, in turn, can be a sounding board for an older child's ideas and can provide a fresh perspective. Tanner, for one, believes that her older daughter's creativity has been boosted by having a younger sister. "It's al-

assertive; a little brother can bring out an older child's nurturing instincts. A child's resentment of a sibling's selfishness or rambunctiousness may even help him appreciate his own generosity or calm nature.

Self-esteem "Whenever my son, Adam, who's 6, does something new—like a counting problem—his older sister, Sophie, will say, 'Mommy, Adam is so smart. Look at what he can do!'" says Joan Weigen, a teacher in Northampton, Massachusetts. "He, of course, loves her saying that he does things well. It makes him proud. And Sophie,



At play (and even at war), siblings pick up lifelong social skills.

lowed her the opportunity to experiment. Chrissy is always saying to Wendy, 'Let's put on a show.' She's like a camp counselor!"

Identity formation With siblings, a child has a built-in, constant opportunity to see the difference between "self" and "not self." This is how a sense of identity is acquired. "Siblings are always comparing themselves," says Dr. Jung. "They use each other as mirrors." This relationship can help certain traits bloom: A big brother might show his sister how to be more

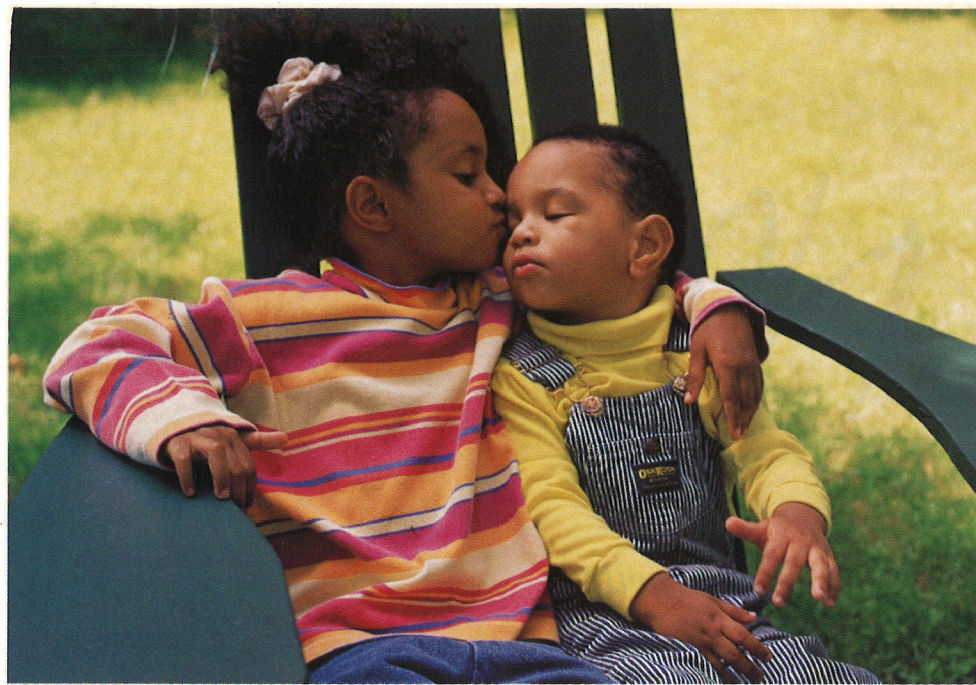
who's 8, feels so competent because she can show and tell him things."

"Having someone on your peer level who loves you unconditionally—and gives you compliments—is important for boosting confidence," says Renee A. Cohen, Ph.D., a Los Angeles clinical psychologist in private practice. When kids get a pat on the back from a peer, she explains, they know they can trust that their achievement is genuine. "A brother saying to his brother during a softball game, 'Boy, do you have a great swing!' carries a lot of weight," says Dr. Cohen.

How to Foster Good Sibling Relationships

Although parents can't be held completely responsible for how kids get along, adults' attitudes and reactions do affect sibling ties. Important pointers to keep in mind:

- **Make every child feel loved.** Yes, there are limits to your time and energy. But as long as parents convey the message that love is not a pie to be divided up, kids will feel that there is enough affection to go around.
- **Listen when a child says, "That's not fair."** Even if you think you're not being more protective or more critical of one sibling, it's your child's perceptions that matter. Address your child's specific concerns with reassuring words.
- **Don't compare children out loud.** Never say, for example, "Why can't you be as neat as your sister?" or make similar comparisons, which can lead to resentment. Respect children's individual differences, for better *and* worse.
- **Give kids their own space and possessions.** The healthier a child's sense of individuality is, the less he'll feel threatened by his siblings.
- **Discipline in private.** If you have to talk with one child about her behavior, do so out of the other sibling's hearing so you don't escalate any tensions between them.
- **Promote companionship.** If you are close to your own siblings, talk about how wonderful your relationship is. If you're still not getting along with your sibs, avoid bad-mouthing them in front of your children.
- **Instill a sense of family loyalty.** If one of your children gets teased by a sibling's friend, make it clear that such behavior won't be tolerated—and that the sibling should stick up for her brother or sister. Giving children a sense of family loyalty helps bring them closer together.
- **Give praise for positive relationships.** When your older child plays with his younger sibling, make comments such as "You're so good with her" or "You play so nicely together." When older kids cooperate with one another or help each other out, commend them.



In today's hectic world, siblings turn to each other for contact and constancy.

Social skills A sibling is the first "other" with whom a child learns how to collaborate, whether figuring out how to behave in a new situation or how to get a parent to say "yes." Again, it's not always the older child who takes the lead. Atticus Bieff, 3, often helps his older brother, Gwyn, 5, traverse frightening territory. "Gwyn may be older and more cerebral, but Atticus is definitely more outgoing," says their fa-

ther. "They're not going to hurt you. And you'll get a prize at the end!"

In the Tanner family, both girls have learning disabilities. "Chrissy is wonderfully reassuring with her sister," says their mother. "When Wendy gets frustrated, Chrissy says, 'Remember when I had to go to the tutor? Remember how hard it was for me? And now reading is my favorite activity.' The older one is a real source

As brothers and sisters bump up against each other, they learn how to compromise, negotiate, and understand people.

of encouragement and comfort."

ther, Neil, a New York City fashion designer. "It's kind of surprising, but in social settings Gwyn almost relies on Atticus to pave the way."

"Siblings watch and model one another," says Dr. Cohen. If one child throws a tantrum and is reprimanded by parents, her sibling may avoid that ploy. But if she sees that a sibling's saying "please" is rewarded by parents, she might decide to follow in her footsteps. "Kids figure out how to handle situations in a way they couldn't learn from adults," she says.

Emotional support Siblings help one another navigate the rough seas of life, providing a comforting shoulder and a reality check. Recently, when Adam Weigen went to the dentist for the first time ever, his older sister, Sophie, "prepared him," recalls their mother. "I heard Sophie telling him, 'Don't worry,

of encouragement and comfort."

When siblings have a trusting relationship, they may divulge feelings they don't want to share with parents. In the long run, says Dr. Cohen, "this can help them learn to reveal emotions without feeling vulnerable" and to become emotionally healthy adults.

What's So Good About Sibling Rivalry

It was Freud who first theorized that siblings can stir up children's darkest emotions. The good news from modern-day psychologists: Sibling rivalry isn't necessarily bad. In fact, conflict can promote social and emotional growth, as long as no one sibling is either victim or villain.

"We shouldn't judge it as 'bad' if kids fight," says Dr. Jung. As brothers and sisters jockey for position and prominence (*Continued on page 148*)

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(Continued from page 129) in the family and bump up against each other's limits, likes, and dislikes, they learn how to compromise, negotiate, and understand people. "Siblings know just how to push each other's buttons," says Dr. Jung. It is this "reading" of another person that teaches a child how to understand the motivation and intention of others.

Sibling aggression forces kids into what Hartford, Connecticut, family therapist Michael Kahn, Ph.D., author

research indicates that parents play a lesser role in this complex equation than once thought, says Dr. Dunn. Many other factors come into play:

● **Family size:** "The intensity of competition and often of closeness is stronger in two-sibling families," says Klagsbrun. "In larger families, there's always someone else to turn to.

● **Gender:** Research shows that sisters usually develop the closest bonds—and also have the fiercest fights. Brothers tend to exhibit the greatest

"Siblings test out love and hate without the danger of loss—friendships have to be earned, but your brother or sister will always be there," says Dr. Jung.

of *The Sibling Bond*, calls "a social laboratory," an arena in which kids develop "competence, morality, even courage and creativity."

Sibling battles also help kids develop an emotional repertoire. "The parents lay the groundwork for socialization and moral conscience, but the child also needs a place to practice and experience raw, primitive emotions, like greed, envy, anger, and aggression," says Dr. Jung. "Siblings test out love and hate without the danger of loss—friendships have to be earned, but your brother or sister will always be there."

If kids don't have a chance to handle discord and competition within the family, they may not be prepared to do so with others. As Francine Klagsbrun, New York City-based author of *Mixed Feelings: Love, Hate, Rivalry, and Reconciliation Among Brothers and Sisters*, points out, "Siblings learn universal lessons in how far they can go before provoking retaliation."

Beyond Parents' Influence

Clearly, watching brothers and sisters relate is to bear witness to the most enduring and complicated family bond. Because conventional wisdom tends to hold parents responsible for kids' relationships, parents often worry whether they're doing all they can to help kids get along. No doubt, their attitudes are significant elements. But

degree of competitiveness. Yet most gender studies involve *adult* siblings looking back at childhood; hopefully, girls and boys today are raised with equal expectations.

● **Disposition:** "Kids' personalities are pretty stable from early on, and you can't hold parents responsible for something they can't control," says Dr. Dunn. Two extremely aggressive siblings, for example, could prove a volatile mix. "But you can't simply assume that the aggression is harmful," says Dr. Jung. "They may teach each other how to deal with anger."

In the meantime, of course, it could be a bumpy ride for parents. Watching siblings fight can be confusing, even threatening. "Adults work hard to control wild emotions and instincts. And when they see their kids go at each other, they immediately see that as dangerous," says Dr. Jung.

Yet even when siblings seem intent on killing each other, it's important for parents to keep a sense of humor—and perspective. As Dr. Jung notes, siblings go through stages. They tend to lock horns most fiercely during their early and middle-school years. But the tenor of this bond is not etched in stone. "We never know until siblings are adults what their relationship will *really* be like," she says. ■

Child contributor Melinda Blau, who lives in Northampton, Massachusetts, has won several awards for this column.