

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Sibling Rivalry

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in School Age Children

Three Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My children have trouble getting along. How can I help them?

While it's normal for there to be some sibling rivalry, there is a lot that parents can do to help their children get along. In fact, conflict can be an opportunity for parents to promote the life skill of Perspective Taking, or learning to see another person's point of view. This skill is essential to relating to others and to reducing conflict.

Rebecca Saxe of MIT uses fMRI technology to study the brain region used when children think about others' thoughts and feelings. She says:

In order to predict what somebody else is going to do if they know different things than you do, if they believe different things than you do, or if they see different things than you do, you have to be able to step out of your own perspective and step into their perspective.

Another way to say that is, you have to be able to inhibit your own knowledge ... [T]hat's an incredibly important accomplishment, and it's developing a lot, changing a lot, between ages two and six.

1. Help your children learn to understand their sibling's perspective by stepping back and asking questions.

Suggest to your children that they try to imagine what their sibling might be experiencing. You can use questions like:

- "What are the things that might be annoying/bothering him or her?"
- "How might he or she be feeling?"
- "What might he or she be thinking?"

They can do this in private or directly ask each other.

Ross Thompson at the University of California at Davis has found that how children gain insight into "what goes on in people's hearts and minds" depends on how parents interpret "the everyday events of their lives."

2. Share your understanding. Talk with your children and express what you see as each child's experience in the disagreement. Often this type of communication goes best during a quiet one-on-one time with each child. When you talk about your observations, be open to hearing what your child thinks of your hypotheses.

- Does it make sense to him or her?
- Does your child have other ideas about what might be going on?

The important message for both you and your children to keep in mind is that not everyone experiences the same situation in the same way.

Larry Aber of New York University has studied the connection between Perspective Taking and aggression and has found that children who can understand others have less of a need to strike or hurt others. According to Aber, when you help teach your children how to gain perspective on a situation, “you’ve opened the gate to their using problem-solving skills.”

3. Use a problem- or dilemma-resolving technique. Just as with adults, when children come up with solutions on their own, they’re more likely to try to make them succeed. With your children:

- identify the dilemma, problem, or issue;
- determine the goal;
- come up with alternative solutions that might stop a fight or mediate a conflict;
- consider how each solution might work and discuss the pros and cons;
- agree on a solution to try; and
- evaluate the outcome, and if the solution isn’t working, try something else.

Through this process, you are helping your children get along better and you are encouraging problem-solving and cooperation—vital skills for navigating the social world.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that you set guidelines on how children can disagree and resolve conflicts. You can have regular family meetings to express thoughts and feelings, as well as to plan the week’s events and to give positive recognition. Avoid taking sides on sibling conflicts and/or making comparisons between your children. Each child is unique and has different needs.

In the words of Daniel Stern, a pioneer in the field of child psychiatry, the process of growing up is “learning to BE (or get along) with others.”

These three strategies will promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and move from managing behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy; it involves figuring out what others think and feel and forms the basis for children’s understanding of their parents’, teachers’, and friends’ intentions. Children who can take others’ perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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