

Family Keys

Self-Care Resources for Children & Their Families

Getting Along with Others

9 KEY

Deciding if self-care is right for your family becomes more complex when two or more children are involved. If children are to be left together without

adult supervision, one rule some parents use is that every child should be ready for self-care.

Sometimes, however, self-care is appropriate for one child and not the other. In this case, should one child be “put in charge” of another? This is a complicated question.



What are your options?

There are several ways families can handle the relationship between two or more siblings at home alone together. Here are some advantages and disadvantages of two options.

1. Shared self-care

When siblings are very near in age — or when the older child is not ready for the responsibility of supervising the younger child — it is generally better to make each child responsible for his or her own care. Each organizes his or her time, chores and activities. The children keep each other company, look out for each other, and help each other in emergencies. Neither child is “boss,” and each reports to you directly.

- ▼ **Advantages:** Younger children may be happier if they don't feel “bossed around” by the older child. They may feel more trusted.
- ▼ **Disadvantages:** Children close in age may be more prone to conflicts and fights, which can be especially difficult if roles, limits and responsibilities are not clearly defined.

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What are your options?
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2. Older child as sitter

As sitter, the older child is responsible for supervising the younger child, which includes enforcing rules and handling emergencies. This plan is most successful when the children are not close together in age, but spaced at least 3 or 4 years apart. For this to work well, the older child also needs special preparation.

▼ **Advantages:** Older children are flattered by their parents' show of trust in their abilities as sitter. It can be satisfying to know that they are contributing to family welfare, and they may gain skills useful for their future role as parents. Children in 4th or 5th grades may prefer being at home with an older brother or sister to being in a child care program with younger children.

▼ **Disadvantages:** The older child may feel it is not fair having so much responsibility, and may have to give up some other activities after school in order to be a good caretaker. The younger child may resent being "told what to do" by a child only a couple of years older.

Parents can help:

Parents need to have realistic expectations. As a family, talk about the needs of every family member after school, and develop a plan clearly stating rules for baby — sitting — whether or not specific friends can come over, when homework is to be done. Make sure you let the older child know that you appreciate his or her help, too.

Conflict with Siblings

Conflict with friends and siblings is a normal part of development. Conflict is particularly likely where children are close in age and related. Children of the same sex and close in age may feel in competition with each other.

"No-holds-barred" quarrels are especially common between siblings who — unlike friends — know that no matter how much they fight, they will always have a relationship with each other.

During the middle childhood years, most children tend to see things in "black and white" — thinking themselves "right" and the other person "wrong." They expect the other to simply confess or give in. They find it hard to understand that most conflicts arise from different points of view rather than "fault."

Not until adolescence do most children fully appreciate that the best solutions to conflicts are solutions that both parties agree on.

Although research suggests that some brothers and sisters get along **better** when adults aren't present, others have intense fights. Constant conflict among siblings can be dangerous to children, and upsetting to family members.

Children can hurt each other physically and emotionally. For example, the younger child may suffer a loss of self-esteem if constantly teased.

Frequently, children call parents at work asking them to help solve conflicts. Such interruptions can be difficult for working parents.

Some conflict — little quarrels and verbal debates — can be beneficial to children's development, however. Through disputes, children become more aware of others' rights and needs, learn to assert themselves as individuals, and develop social problem-solving skills.

Children need effective strategies to resolve conflicts in self-care situations. As a family, work to develop strategies to handle sibling conflict.



Parents can help:

1. **Set clear family rules.** Writing down family rules and posting them in the house will help avoid some conflicts. *Key 2* covers setting family rules.
 2. **Give each child plenty of individual attention to lessen competition.** Sometimes children fight to get attention.
 3. **Teach children a variety of acceptable ways to resolve conflict.** Examples include taking turns, flipping a coin, splitting the difference.
 4. **Let children solve some problems on their own, if they can do so safely.** Let your children know you have confidence in their ability to resolve the conflict. When you hear arguing, listen from a distance without stepping in right away. Remind the children of problem-solving strategies, and offer suggestions when necessary.
 5. **Help children develop good communication skills,** such as listening well and sharing feelings with others through the use of "I" statements.
- Here are some examples of "I messages" for siblings:
- "It makes me mad when I'm in the middle of a program and the channel is suddenly changed. I need you to talk to me when you don't want to watch what's on."*
- "I need to be able to go in my room and have privacy."*
- "It makes me mad when I can't find my stuff because it was moved. I need to know where my stuff is so I can get my homework done on time."*- 6. **Try to plan some separate activities for each child** to minimize the number of hours they spend together each week.
- 7. **Pay attention to the kinds of problems your children** continuously argue about, such as TV, chores or snacks. Use family meetings to work out advance plans to prevent conflict over these issues.

What does a sitter need to know?

Caring for younger members of the family requires special skills and planning. In addition to all of the self-care skills discussed in these *Family Keys*, a child who is given responsibility for supervising a younger sibling needs some special knowledge and skills.

What can I do to entertain younger children and keep them safe, busy and happy?

Children who take care of their younger family members should know what things younger children like and are able to do, and which things they need help with.

Caretakers should be able to:

- ▼ Judge when an activity is too hard or frustrating for a younger child, and
- ▼ See potential risks that the younger child may not be able to see.

For example, the younger child may forget to wash hands before making a snack, or forget to turn pan handles inward while heating something on the stove.

What am I supposed to do if the younger child won't follow family rules or do as I say?

Children need to learn to:

- ▼ **Never** use physical force when a brother or sister acts up, and

- ▼ **Always** avoid saying abusive remarks that only make a situation worse.

Instead of saying something like *"Get down from that, you pig head,"* remind the younger child of the house rule and explain *why* the rule is important.

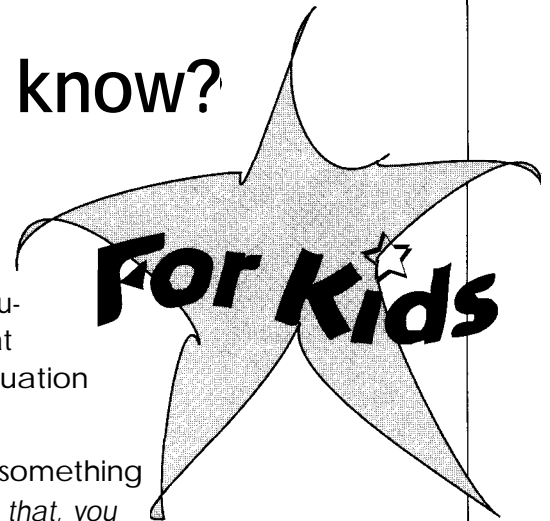
For example: *"We aren't supposed to use the bed as a trampoline. Mom says it wrecks the springs."*

In situations that could result in injury, have a contact person to call for advice — for example:

"Aunt Jessie, Sirena is climbing out on the roof and won't come down."

What activities – like homework or having friends over – can I still do along with my caretaking duties?

Caring for a younger brother or sister is an important job that demands a great deal of attention. But older children also need time to do homework, to be with friends, to go to after-school clubs and activities, or just be alone from time to time. Talk with your family about house rules for caring for a younger child.





Think up solutions.

Gather your whole family, paper and pens and pencils for this activity. Read each of the following situations. Then think of as many solutions to the problem as you can. Write down the solutions, and discuss each one as a family. Which solution to the problem would most likely end the disagreement?

Situation

1. You are watching your favorite TV program. Your sister comes in and changes the channel to another station.
2. You and your brother usually do the dishes. You take turns washing and drying. You think it is your turn to dry, but he insists it's his turn.
3. Your cousin hits you because you didn't do what she wants you to do.
4. Your family had chocolate cake for dessert last night. You saved half of your piece for a snack after school. But when you look for it, you find your step-brother just ate it.

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KEY

Getting Along with Others

tells about challenges of

having more than one child in self-care, and some of the special skills children need to take care of themselves as well as someone younger. This may require more responsibility than they are ready to assume. Some family members fight so much they may never be safely left at home. If children in your family cannot get along when adults are present, the problem may intensify when the children are alone.

Resources

An excellent resource is the book *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live, Too*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. Book stores may carry the paperback (New York: Avon Books, 1988), or your local library may have the 1987 Norton edition.

Family Keys 2 covers making family rules.



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