RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS\(^1\) ON MANAGING SIBLING CONFLICT AND AGGRESSION
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Sibling Conflict: an Opportunity for Growth?
The sibling relationship is an important context in which children learn critical interpersonal relationship skills and develop their thinking abilities. During sibling conflicts, children can learn listening skills, cooperation, seeing another person’s point of view, and managing their emotions. Children can also learn how to solve problems, consider future possibilities, and experience consequences of their actions.

When children gain these qualities, they develop warmer sibling relationships and experience less sibling conflict and rivalry. An added benefit from learning these skills is that these ways of interacting with others are carried over to peer and romantic relationships.

Mediation to Manage Sibling Conflict
When children are young, parents can play an important role in managing sibling conflict while helping their children gain social and cognitive abilities. By using the mediation techniques explained below, parents help children become better able to resolve conflicts with their brothers and sisters.

When conflict occurs, a simple and effective four-step mediation process\(^2\) can be used:

1. Identify ground rules and expectations for siblings’ and mediator’s roles (e.g., listen to one another, children take responsibility for solving).
2. Identify issues to be solved (e.g., both want to use the same toy) and note areas of agreement.
3. Discuss each sibling’s perspective to build understanding and empathy.
4. Children propose and agree to solutions to issues identified (e.g., taking turns). Siblings enact the agreed-upon solution.

With practice, these steps go quickly, shortening the length of conflicts, and parent mediation is less likely to be needed as siblings learn to manage their disputes. During this process, younger children may need help developing ideas for solutions, but parents should not take one sibling’s side, show favoritism, or settle the conflict for their children.

Once siblings carry through with their solution, parents should praise their children. It is important to keep in mind that when children take responsibility for resolv-
ing their fight, they develop important interpersonal and thinking skills which benefit their relationships with others now and in the future.

**When Sibling Conflict Goes Too Far**

Most sibling conflict is mild in nature. Teasing, yelling, and bickering are all examples of mild sibling conflicts. However, some sibling experiences include aggressive behavior such as kicking, punching, or threatening a sibling, or purposefully destroying their personal items. Such behavior is often mislabeled and dismissed as harmless rivalry and a normal experience of growing up with a sibling (see **SAARA Bulletin #1**, Disentangling Sibling Rivalry from Aggression and Abuse).

As a perpetrator or victim, aggressive sibling behaviors are linked with lower mental and physical health. The negative impact of aggressive sibling dynamics on mental health and the quality of family relationships can be long lasting.

It is important for parents to not ignore aggressive sibling behaviors or dismiss them as harmless. Families could develop a shared understanding that aggressive behaviors like hitting or intimidating one another are not allowed for any family member.

Sometimes, parents are not aware that aggressive behaviors are taking place between their children. Subtle clues that may indicate a child is being victimized by their sibling include the child avoiding being home and alone with their sibling. If a child tells a parent they are being harmed, they should be believed.

It is important to resist the common urge to fault the sibling who was victimized for being annoying, overly sensitive, or angering their sibling. This form of “blaming the victim” can lead to further disempowerment, hopelessness, and fear. The child who was victimized may think their parent will not protect them from further incidents.

When aggressive behavior does occur, parents must stop it immediately. Parents should not respond to the aggressive behavior with physical punishment or violence. Mediation techniques described in this bulletin could help achieve conflict resolution. However, if the aggressive behavior is part of a persistent pattern of harm accompanied by a power imbalance between siblings, mediation will not work, and could make things worse.

A small number of children are abused by their sibling (see **SAARA Bulletin #1**, Disentangling Sibling Rivalry from Aggression and Abuse). If parents believe that potential or actual psychological, physical, or sexual abuse has occurred, parents should seek help from a mental health or medical professional (see **SAARA Bulletin #3**, Sibling Aggression and Abuse: Recommendations and Resources for Parents and Professionals).

**Notes**

1 We use the term parents here to include anyone who plays a parent-like or caregiver role in a child’s life, including stepparents, grandparents, and foster parents.