

# NAVIGATING SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

## GOAL

To support you in fostering positive sibling relationships through structure, reinforcement, and empathy—while helping your children build connection, cooperation, and conflict-resolution skills.

## BACKGROUND

Siblings don't always get along—and that's normal. But when one child has developmental delays or support needs, the sibling dynamic can be even more challenging. Jealousy, misunderstandings, and frequent conflict may leave you feeling overwhelmed or stuck in referee mode.

Sibling relationships take time, structure, and guidance to grow. By setting clear expectations, teaching cooperative behaviors, and reinforcing small wins, you can help your children build a foundation of trust, empathy, and teamwork.

## WHAT'S "NORMAL" ANYWAY?

It's completely normal for siblings to argue, compete, and push each other's buttons—especially when one child has extra support needs. You're not doing anything wrong if they bicker or if things feel unfair sometimes.

Here are a few reminders that might take some pressure off:

- Perfect harmony isn't the goal.
- Small wins matter.
- You can't force a bond—but you can create the conditions for one to grow.

This lesson isn't about making your children best friends. It's about giving them the tools they need to live, grow, and play together with as much respect—and as little chaos—as possible.

# SETTING THE STAGE FOR POSITIVE INTERACTIONS

Sibling relationships don't improve overnight—but with a little planning and structure, you can set the stage for more peaceful, positive interactions. This page will help you create the right conditions for connection, while also giving your children space to grow as individuals.

## START SMALL & STRUCTURE SUCCESS

Siblings don't need to spend all day together to build a bond. Start with short, structured interactions—just 5 or 10 minutes at a time. Choose activities that both children can enjoy and succeed at. These positive moments create a foundation for trust and connection. Helpful activities include:

- Building with blocks or Legos
- Drawing or coloring side-by-side
- Completing a shared puzzle
- Taking turns adding pieces to a tower or project
- Playing with sensory bins or water toys

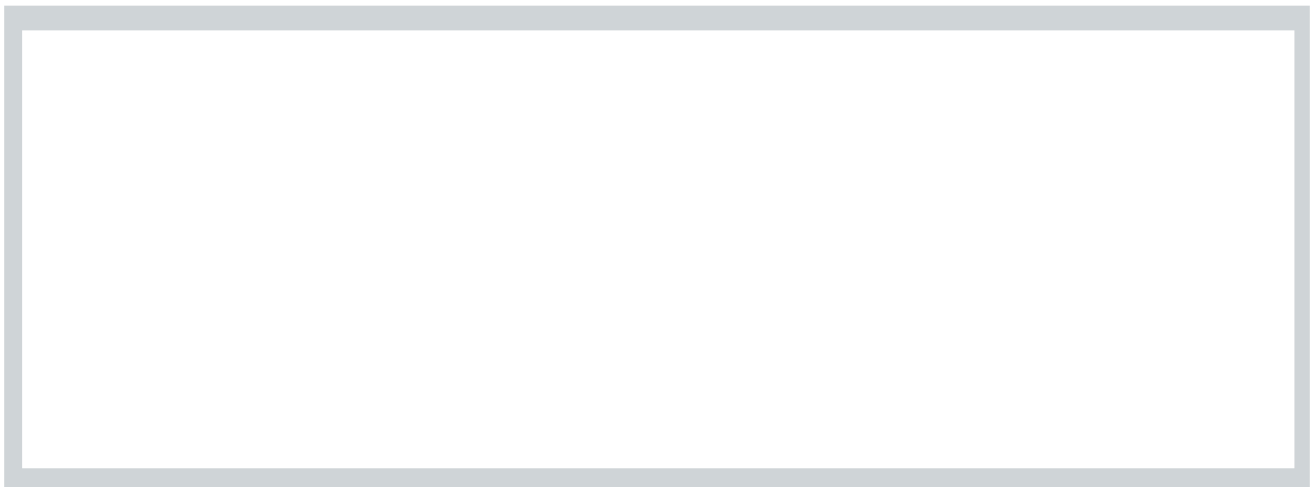
## CREATE PERSONAL SPACE

When siblings share space all the time, tension can build—especially if one child feels overwhelmed or invaded. Every child needs a place where they can take a break, be alone, or play without interruption. This doesn't require a separate room. It could be:

- A pop-up tent in a shared bedroom
- A cozy chair with a blanket fort
- A bin of "my toys only" items
- A corner with noise-canceling headphones and fidget tools

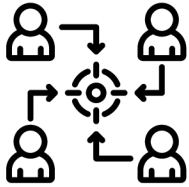
Teaching both kids to respect this space helps reduce conflict and builds emotional awareness.

**What activities do your children enjoy together?**



# ENCOURAGING COOPERATION

Sibling cooperation doesn't just happen—it's something you can teach and encourage with the right tools. These strategies help shift the focus from constant conflict to shared goals, mutual respect, and a little more teamwork in your daily routines.



## SET SHARED GOALS

Kids love a challenge—especially when there's something fun at the end. Use simple, shared goals like:

"If you both play without arguing for 10 minutes, we'll have a dance party!"

This creates a team mentality. Keep goals short, clear, and achievable, then celebrate success.



## COACH, DON'T REFEREE

When conflict comes up, resist the urge to jump in and pick a side. Instead, guide both kids toward the solution. You might say:

"Let's pause. What do we need to fix this?"

Teach scripts like, "Can I have a turn?" or "I'm not done yet." These phrases help kids navigate future disagreements without adult intervention.



## REINFORCE THE RIGHT MOMENTS

Catch your kids being kind. Even small things—waiting their turn, offering a toy, or helping clean up—deserve attention. Use specific praise like:

"I noticed you helped your brother with his game. That was so thoughtful."

Over time, this positive attention builds better habits than focusing only on what's going wrong.



## USE VISUAL TOOLS

Visual supports help keep things clear and fair. Try:

- A simple timer to show when it's time to switch turns
- A "sharing schedule" that rotates favorite toys
- A sticker chart where they earn rewards together

These tools help reduce arguments and give structure to tricky moments.

# FOSTER COOPERATION, NOT COMPETITION

Sibling relationships can quickly shift into rivalry if children feel like they're constantly being compared. Instead, we want to create an environment where teamwork is encouraged and children can feel proud of each other's success—not threatened by it. These simple shifts in language and structure can reduce conflict and promote cooperation.

## Do this:



### Use Group Goals

- Create opportunities where siblings work together to earn something fun.
- Reinforce teamwork and shared efforts, not just individual accomplishments.



### Praise Cooperation Out Loud

- Let your children hear you notice and celebrate when they help each other.
- Be specific: "I love how you waited for your brother so he could catch up!"



### Be Mindful of Comparisons

- Focus on each child's progress.
- Encourage each child's strengths individually.

## Not this:



### Don't Pit Them Against Each Other

- Avoid competition-based systems where one child wins and the other loses.
- This can create resentment or discourage effort from the "losing" child.



### Don't Ignore Positive Moments

- When you're busy, it's easy to miss the good stuff.
- Make a habit of noticing and reinforcing even small moments of sibling kindness or patience.



### Don't Assume Fair Means Equal

- Your children might need different types of support, and that's okay.
- Fairness means meeting each child's needs—not giving them the exact same thing.

**What's one small way you could encourage teamwork between your children this week?**

# WHAT TO DO WHEN SIBLING CONFLICT HAPPENS

Even with strong routines and positive reinforcement, sibling conflict is bound to happen. It's part of growing up and learning how to navigate relationships. The goal isn't to eliminate all conflict—but to help your children handle it more constructively.

## STAY GROUNDED IN THE MOMENT

When conflict happens, your calm presence can make a big difference. Instead of jumping in right away to solve it, try to slow things down and guide your children through the process.

- ✓ Take a breath before stepping in.
- ✓ Separate the children if emotions are running high.
- ✓ Use a calm voice and neutral tone.
- ✓ Focus on what needs to happen next, not just what went wrong.
- ✓ Give each child a chance to share, even if they're upset.
- ✓ Model how to problem-solve instead of assigning blame.

## TEACH SKILLS THROUGH REPAIR

Conflict is an opportunity to teach important social skills. Once everyone is calm, help your children think about what they could do differently next time.



**Offer Repair Phrases-**Teach simple phrases like "Can we try again?" or "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."



**Model and Practice-** Role-play similar situations to practice better responses outside of heightened situations.



**Reinforce the Effort-**Praise attempts at resolving conflict, even if it's not perfect. Recognize how difficult the situation is for all involved.



**Use Visual or Written Supports-**Some children benefit from visuals or social stories that outline what to say or do during conflict. These can serve as helpful reminders in the moment.

Every moment won't be a teachable one—and that's okay. Sometimes, just being present, calm, and consistent is enough to plant the seeds for better interactions tomorrow.

# FOSTERING LASTING CONNECTIONS

Sibling relationships will grow and change over time. As a parent, you can help build a foundation for a healthy, respectful connection between your children—one rooted in empathy, trust, and shared experiences. These strategies can help support that connection even through the ups

## MODEL POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

Your children are always watching. The way you handle conflict, show empathy, and repair relationships sets the tone for how they treat each other. Modeling kindness and communication helps them build those same habits. Use these strategies:

- Narrate your own calm problem-solving out loud.
- Apologize when you make mistakes and show how to make it right.
- Treat both children with respect, even in stressful moments.
- Show appreciation when they treat each other with care.

## PRAISE COOPERATION AND KINDNESS

It's easy to focus on problem behavior, but positive moments need attention too. Praise is more powerful when it's specific, timely, and authentic. Use phrases like:

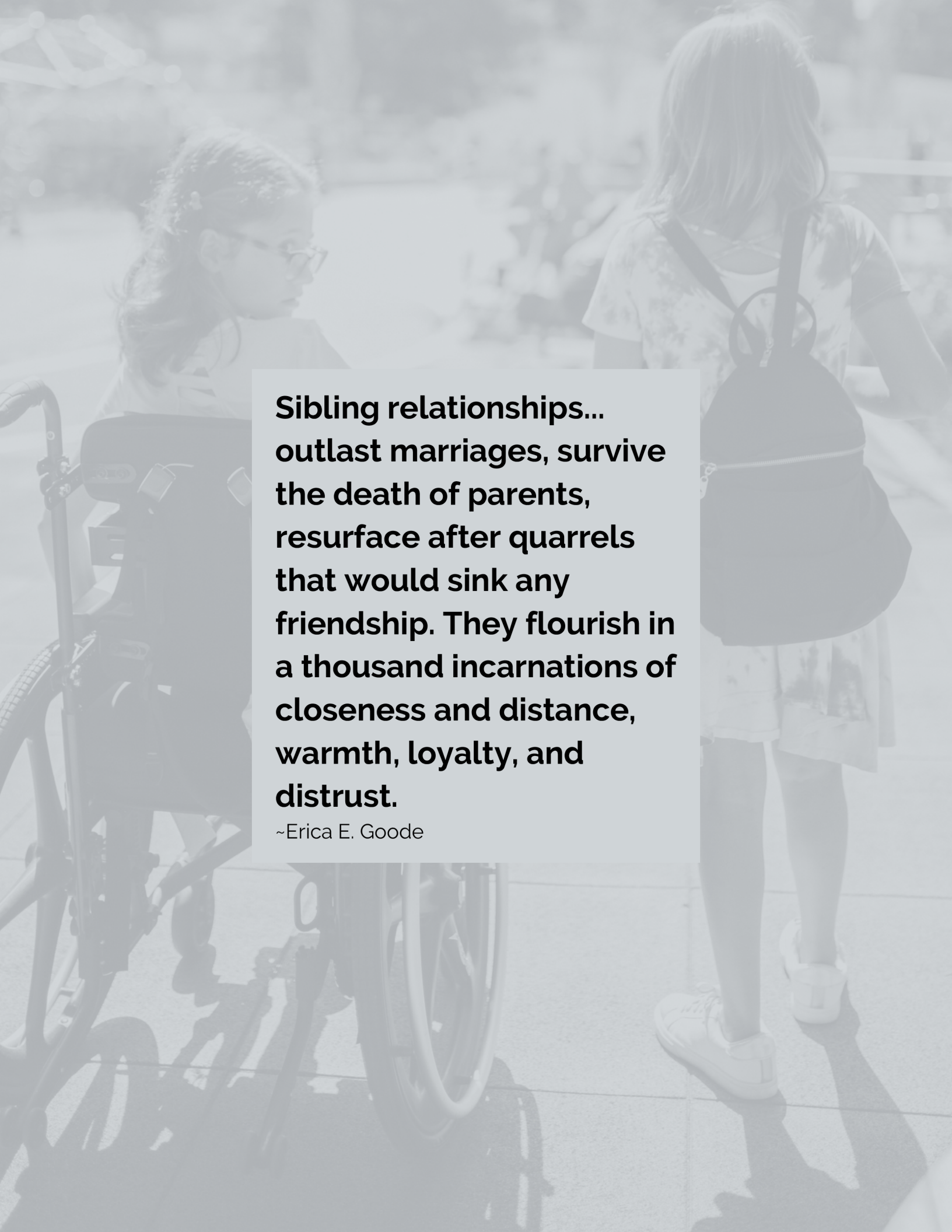
- "You waited so patiently while your sister finished her turn."
- "That was kind of you to help him clean up."
- "I saw you give her space when she needed it—that was really thoughtful."
- "You're working so well together today. I love seeing that."

## CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT

Sibling connection can grow through shared experiences. You don't have to force togetherness, but intentionally creating space for positive interaction can lead to stronger bonds.

- Schedule low-stress activities they can enjoy together (e.g., baking, building, crafts).
- Encourage turn-taking games that highlight teamwork.
- Share special "sibling rituals" like a weekly movie night or storytime.





**Sibling relationships...  
outlast marriages, survive  
the death of parents,  
resurface after quarrels  
that would sink any  
friendship. They flourish in  
a thousand incarnations of  
closeness and distance,  
warmth, loyalty, and  
distrust.**

~Erica E. Goode