

# Developmental Importance of Sibling Relationships

**Sibling relationships** are one of the most long-lasting and significant relationships for many individuals and play an influential role in child and adolescent development. Sibling relationships impact language and cognition, social-emotional learning, and behavioral regulation. Importantly, healthy sibling relationships have been found to provide protection for a number of negative outcomes throughout the lifespan, including mental illness, conduct disorder, and substance use disorders. Some degree of conflict and competition is developmentally normal

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and appropriate, however high levels of conflict and aggression have been linked to mental illness and conduct problems in adolescence and adulthood.

**Healthy sibling relationships** are particularly important for youth living together or separately in foster care. Fostering warm and supportive siblings are particularly important, as they can help reduce stress, improve mental and behavioral wellbeing, and provide a source of relational continuity and permanency during and after youth's stay in care.



## Strategies to Promote and Strengthen Sibling Relationships for Youth in Foster Care

- 1 Recognize that youth might have a different definition of siblings than you. Allow youth the opportunity to share who they consider siblings.
- 2 Routinely incorporate questions about siblings into assessments of child safety and well-being.
- 3 Ensure consistent, ongoing opportunities for siblings to connect when they are not living together.
- 4 Create opportunities and encourage siblings to engage in normative developmental opportunities together, such as camps, sports, after school programs, and other extracurricular activities.
- 5 Teach siblings how to take a strengths perspective, and to utilize that perspective in their interactions with each other.
- 6 Create opportunities for siblings to learn and engage in problem-solving activities together.
- 7 Encourage, role model, and reinforce positive communication skills that siblings can use during conflicts.
- 8 Teach youth emotion regulation and coping skills, and encourage their use when sibling conflicts arise.