



# Society for Research in Child Development

## Office for Policy and Communications

1313 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20005

OFFICE: (202) 289-7905 • FAX: (202) 289-4203

### **PRESS RELEASE**

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#### Contact Information:

Andrea Browning

Society for Research in Child Development

Office for Policy and Communications

(202) 289-7905

abrowning@srcd.org

### **Helping Children Resolve Past Conflicts May Be Beneficial**

When young children argue with their siblings, they are rarely counseled to address their conflicts after the fighting is over. Rather than encouraging children to forget past disagreements, it might be better for parents to use these quarrels to help their children develop useful skills in conflict resolution.

That's the conclusion of researchers at the Universities of Waterloo and Chicago, who asked 64 pairs of siblings ages 4 to 12 to try to solve an ongoing conflict between them. Their goals: to determine whether young children can negotiate with each other to resolve long-standing disagreements; to learn whether siblings can reach compromises that allow both children to meet at least some of their goals, and to identify strategies used when children agree and when they fail to resolve their differences.

The study, reported in the November/December 2006 issue of *Child Development*, found that at the time conflicts occur, it's difficult for siblings to negotiate constructively and compromise with one another. In contrast, when dealing with past disagreements, many children are able to productively discuss and resolve their differences.

Research shows that children don't readily forget past grievances. But siblings were able to resolve their past differences when they worked together, compromised, and made flexible plans for the future. When children failed to discuss the future or lobbed accusations at each other, they were unable to resolve these conflicts. Even when disagreements were expressed in a reasoned or toned-down manner, they often stood in the way of solutions.

Much of the time, older siblings were the leaders in efforts to resolve conflicts--suggesting, modifying, justifying, and asking their younger siblings to accept proposed solutions. Younger siblings countered and disagreed, but they also helped plan and, at times, agreed to their older brothers' and sisters' plans. When older siblings thought highly of their younger siblings, the children were more likely to reach a compromise.

These findings may provide a lesson to parents, suggest the authors. "By not encouraging after-the-fact negotiations, parents may be losing a valuable opportunity to inspire children to take their siblings' interests into account and to develop effective conflict-resolution skills," concludes Hildy Ross, lead author of the study and a psychology professor at the University of Waterloo.

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Summarized from Child Development, Vol. 77, Issue 5, *How Siblings Resolve Their Conflicts: The Importance of First Offers, Planning and Limited Opposition* by Ross, H, and Ross, M (University of Waterloo), and Stein, N and Trabasso, T (University of Chicago). Copyright 2006 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.