

connecting points for siblings

Help your kids squash squabbles and build bonds this summer.

Released from the structure of school, kids tend to test each other's boundaries. Here's how clear expectations and a little creativity can help your kids enjoy their summer together.

PLAN PLAYTIME, DOWNTIME Set the stage for harmony by keeping your kids' daily schedule predictable while giving them plenty of opportunities to burn energy and explore outdoors. Find a pool, sign up for sports, or encourage backyard games. Balance active time with downtime. Have kids read in their rooms after lunch or set up quiet activities in separate areas of the house. Enforce bedtimes; tempers flare when kids are tired.

COOK UP PROJECTS Encourage working together. Michele Northrup of Tampa initiated a pizza competition in which her 9-year-old son and 8-year-old twin boys dreamed up creative pizza toppings and invited grandparents over to taste-test them. The activity was so successful, she plans to bring it back and expand it this summer.

Treasure hunts requiring a team effort worked for Denise Waggoner, a mother of three in Auburndale, Florida.

"Saying hurtful words to each other chips away at the bond my children have," she says. "I try to find things to build that back."

GIVE KIDS TIME APART Richard Collins of Marietta, Georgia, nurtures his kids' talents and gives them a break from each other. While his 6-year-old daughter enjoys ballet and science, his 8-year-old son likes chess. If grandparents are nearby, see if they'll take a child for an extended visit to give one-on-one attention kids crave. At home, you can set aside a day for each child, letting her decide the activities,

plan the menus, and take over other decisions that make kids feel special.

Balance each day with active time and downtime.

ENCOURAGE SOLUTIONS Set clear rules of conduct, such as no running and yelling in the house or bugging a brother when he wants to be alone in his room. If kids get into an argument, separate them until they calm down. While parents can hear both sides, says Brenda Niel, registered play therapist with The Psychology Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee, "let children settle their own differences as much as possible."

Review with children what they could have done differently and discuss what they learned, says Waggoner.

USE DISTRACTIONS Look for ways to diffuse fights. When Waggoner's kids were younger, she'd give the two offenders paper towels and window cleaner and put them on opposite sides of a sliding glass door. "At the end, they'd be laughing and totally forget what they're fighting about," she says. Northrup had her boys decide who got a coveted toy by playing "rock, paper, scissors." They'd get into the game and forget the argument.

If minor arguments keep sparking despite your best efforts, remember this: "Siblings are supposed to get into squabbles," Niel says. "It's part of their growth." The social lessons they learn—respecting others, negotiating, and working together—can be as important as the academics they study the rest of the year. ■

Sports and outdoor activities aren't just luxuries; they're key ways for kids to burn energy, test skills, and learn to get along.

