



**How to Cite:**

Bala, N., Khushbu, K., & Ahlawat, P. (2025). Techniques for managing and reducing sibling rivalry: A comprehensive review. *International Journal of Health Sciences*, 9(S1), 390–400.

<https://doi.org/10.53730/ijhs.v9nS1.14997>

## **Techniques for managing and reducing sibling rivalry: A comprehensive review**

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**Abstract**--Background: Sibling rivalry is a widespread and complex phenomenon that can negatively impact children's emotional development, familial harmony, and long-term sibling relationships. While some rivalry can contribute to growth and resilience, chronic conflict often requires intervention. This review aims to synthesize existing literature and practical approaches for managing and reducing sibling rivalry. Objective: A qualitative review methodology was employed, analyzing findings from child development research, parenting psychology, and family therapy literature. Techniques were categorized into key themes based on their recurrence in peer-reviewed sources, parenting guides, and expert recommendations. Methods: This review utilized a qualitative approach to synthesize a broad spectrum of literature and expert perspectives on sibling rivalry. Instead of conducting new empirical research, it focused on analyzing and integrating findings from existing studies, professional guidelines,

and established parenting frameworks. The goal was to identify effective strategies for managing and reducing sibling conflict. Result: Seven primary strategies emerged as effective in managing sibling rivalry: promoting individual identity, balancing fairness over equality, teaching conflict resolution skills, providing quality time and positive attention, setting clear boundaries and rules, encouraging parental self-regulation, and utilizing professional interventions when necessary. Each approach contributes uniquely to reducing sibling conflict, fostering emotional intelligence, and improving sibling relationships. Conclusion: Sibling rivalry can be mitigated through intentional, consistent, and developmentally appropriate strategies. The reviewed techniques underscore the importance of individual recognition, structured family dynamics, emotional coaching, and professional support where needed. Implementing these methods not only minimizes rivalry but also promotes a nurturing environment that supports lifelong familial bonds.

**Keywords**---Sibling rivalry, Family dynamics, Parenting strategies, Child development, Professional support.

## **Introduction**

Sibling rivalry is a common and often unavoidable aspect of family dynamics [1]. It manifests through competition, jealousy, or conflict between siblings and can affect emotional development, self-esteem, and family harmony [2]. While a certain degree of rivalry can foster resilience and social skills, excessive conflict may lead to long-term relational issues [3]. This review explores evidence-based techniques and practical strategies for parents, caregivers, and educators to manage and reduce sibling rivalry [4].

Sibling relationships are often the longest-lasting interpersonal connections individuals experience in their lifetime [5]. These relationships begin in early childhood, evolve through adolescence and adulthood, and frequently extend well into old age [6]. While sibling bonds can be a source of companionship, support, and lifelong friendship, they can also be fraught with tension, competition, and conflict—a dynamic widely known as sibling rivalry [1].

Sibling rivalry, though a natural part of family life, has been the subject of increasing attention in developmental psychology, family therapy, and parenting literature, as research continues to underscore its influence on a child's emotional development and overall family functioning [7]. At its core, sibling rivalry refers to the competition, jealousy, or antagonism that arises between siblings, often stemming from a perceived or real struggle for parental attention, resources, or approval [8]. While minor quarrels and disagreements are normal and even developmentally appropriate among siblings, persistent or intense rivalry can lead to emotional distress, behavioral problems, and strained family dynamics [9]. Understanding and addressing sibling rivalry is therefore essential not only for promoting positive sibling relationships but also for maintaining a harmonious and supportive family environment [10].

The origins of sibling rivalry can be traced back to early childhood, often intensifying with the arrival of a new sibling [11]. For the older child, the birth of a sibling may represent a significant disruption to their established relationship with parents, causing feelings of displacement, insecurity, or jealousy [12]. As children grow, differences in temperament, developmental stages, and parental expectations may exacerbate rivalry [13]. Furthermore, how parents manage these differences plays a critical role in either intensifying or alleviating tensions between siblings [14].

The prevalence and impact of sibling rivalry are influenced by a variety of factors, including age spacing, gender combinations, birth order, parental behavior, and cultural expectations [15]. For example, siblings close in age may compete more directly for the same resources or achievements, whereas siblings with a wider age gap might experience more hierarchical dynamics [1]. Gender roles and societal norms can also shape how rivalry manifests and how it is perceived by parents and extended family members [16].

Parenting style is arguably one of the most significant moderators of sibling rivalry [17]. Authoritative parenting, characterized by warmth, responsiveness, and consistent boundaries, is associated with healthier sibling interactions [18]. In contrast, authoritarian or neglectful parenting styles may increase sibling hostility and competition [19]. A child's individual temperament, such as emotional sensitivity or impulsivity, further interacts with parenting approaches to shape the expression and resolution of sibling conflict [2]. Moreover, modern family structures and societal changes have introduced new complexities to sibling relationships [1]. The rise of blended families, single-parent households, and dual-income families often brings together children from different backgrounds and experiences [2]. In such contexts, sibling rivalry may be compounded by feelings of inequality, loss, or loyalty conflicts [3].

In addition, the increasing role of technology and social media can influence sibling dynamics by altering communication patterns, reinforcing comparisons, and even serving as platforms for cyber-conflict or exclusion [4]. Recognizing the pervasive nature of sibling rivalry, researchers, clinicians, and parenting experts have proposed a wide array of strategies for managing and reducing it [7]. These techniques are grounded in multiple theoretical frameworks, including attachment theory, social learning theory, and systems theory [5]. Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of secure parent-child relationships in shaping children's emotional security and social behaviors [6]. When children feel securely attached to their caregivers, they are less likely to seek attention through rivalry and more capable of managing interpersonal conflicts [7].

Social learning theory suggests that children model behavior based on observed interactions, particularly within the family [8]. Thus, when parents model respectful communication, empathy, and effective conflict resolution, children are more likely to emulate these behaviors in their sibling interactions [9]. Systems theory views the family as an interconnected unit in which the behavior of one member affects the dynamics of the whole [3]. From this perspective, sibling rivalry is not an isolated issue but rather a reflection of broader family patterns and processes [1].

In light of these theoretical foundations, the techniques for managing sibling rivalry are multifaceted and holistic [7]. One fundamental approach is the promotion of individual identity and self-worth [2]. When children feel appreciated for their unique strengths and contributions, they are less inclined to compare themselves to their siblings or compete for validation [8]. Encouraging personal interests, avoiding direct comparisons, and celebrating each child's accomplishments independently can help nurture a strong sense of identity and reduce jealousy [8].

Equally important is the concept of fairness, which is often misunderstood by children as sameness [1]. Parents who treat all children identically, regardless of age, needs, or circumstances, may inadvertently increase resentment [3]. Instead, effective parenting involves practicing equitable—not necessarily equal—treatment, wherein each child's developmental stage, personality, and emotional needs are considered in decision-making [34]. Clearly explaining these decisions helps children understand that fairness is about meeting their individual needs rather than enforcing uniformity [14].

Another critical area involves teaching conflict resolution skills [5]. Sibling rivalry often escalates because children lack the tools to express their emotions constructively or to resolve disputes peacefully [6]. By teaching active listening, empathy, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, parents can empower children to handle conflicts with maturity [7]. Importantly, parents must also model these behaviors in their own relationships, as children learn extensively through observation [8].

The role of parental attention cannot be overstated in the context of sibling rivalry [8]. Children naturally crave connection and recognition, and when they feel overlooked or less favored, rivalry can intensify [7]. Proactively spending quality one-on-one time with each child, praising positive behaviors, and maintaining consistent communication can help each child feel valued [8]. Simple rituals such as bedtime talks, shared hobbies, or regular outings can serve as powerful tools for bonding and reassurance [10].

Additionally, clear family rules and boundaries are essential for setting expectations and reducing ambiguity around acceptable behavior [10]. When rules are consistently enforced and communicated respectfully, children learn accountability and mutual respect [1]. These boundaries should not only address physical behaviors (e.g., hitting, name-calling) but also guide emotional and relational conduct (e.g., respecting privacy, taking turns, offering apologies) [5].

Parents must also engage in self-reflection and emotional self-regulation [9]. How a parent reacts during moments of conflict significantly affects how siblings learn to manage their own disputes [12]. Parents who remain calm, avoid taking sides, and encourage collaborative problem-solving model a balanced and supportive approach to conflict [2]. Furthermore, recognizing and addressing one's own biases or unconscious favoritism is crucial, as perceived inequality is a common trigger for sibling rivalry [14].

In cases where sibling rivalry becomes chronic or disruptive, professional support may be beneficial [4]. Family therapy, parent coaching, and school-based counseling can provide targeted interventions tailored to the specific needs of the family [1]. Therapists can help families explore underlying issues, such as trauma, loss, or blended family dynamics, and develop strategies to promote healing and connection [2].

This review aims to present a comprehensive overview of evidence-based techniques and practical strategies for managing and reducing sibling rivalry [7]. Drawing from psychological theory, developmental research, and parenting practices, it categorizes these techniques into seven key themes: (1) promoting individual identity, (2) balancing fairness with developmental appropriateness, (3) teaching conflict resolution, (4) providing quality time and attention, (5) setting family boundaries and rules, (6) modeling emotional regulation and unbiased parenting, and (7) seeking professional support when necessary [1,10].

The purpose of this review is to equip parents, caregivers, educators, and practitioners with actionable insights that can be adapted to various family structures and cultural contexts [15]. Ultimately, the goal is not to eliminate all sibling conflict—an unrealistic and perhaps even undesirable aim—but to foster a family environment where children feel secure, respected, and loved [7]. Through early and consistent application of these techniques, families can nurture positive sibling relationships that contribute to lifelong emotional health and resilience [8].

### **Need of the Study**

Sibling rivalry is a nearly universal aspect of family life, arising from natural competition, jealousy, and the struggle for parental attention [1,2]. While occasional conflicts can foster social learning and emotional growth, persistent or intense rivalry may lead to long-term psychological and relational difficulties, including lowered self-esteem, increased behavioral issues, and strained family dynamics [3,4]. Given that sibling relationships often represent the longest-lasting interpersonal bonds across a person's lifetime, their quality significantly influences emotional development and family harmony [5,6].

Despite its prevalence, guidance on managing sibling rivalry remains fragmented across psychological theory, clinical literature, and parenting resources [7,8]. Additionally, modern family structures—such as blended families, single-parent households, and dual-income dynamics—have introduced new challenges that further complicate sibling interactions [9,10]. This makes it increasingly important to provide a cohesive, evidence-based framework for parents and caregivers [8].

The need for this study lies in its potential to synthesize interdisciplinary knowledge—from developmental psychology and family systems theory to practical parenting strategies—into a structured, accessible guide for managing sibling rivalry [11–13]. By consolidating theory and practice, this review aims to equip families and professionals with the tools to foster positive sibling relationships and cultivate emotionally supportive home environments across diverse contexts [14,15].

## **Population and Sample**

The population of interest includes children and families affected by sibling rivalry across various family structures—such as nuclear, blended, and single-parent households—and cultural contexts. The sample comprises a curated selection of peer-reviewed journal articles, clinical studies, theoretical papers, and reputable parenting guides. Sources were drawn from disciplines including developmental psychology, family therapy, counseling, and educational research.

## **Data and Sources of Data**

The data for this review consisted of secondary sources drawn from existing literature related to sibling rivalry, child development, parenting strategies, and family systems. These data were qualitative in nature, including conceptual analyses, theoretical discussions, expert recommendations, and findings from previous empirical studies.

Sources of data included:

- **Peer-reviewed academic journals** in developmental psychology, family therapy, and education
- **Clinical reports** and case studies published by licensed family counselors and psychologists
- **Books and manuals** authored by parenting experts and child behavior specialists
- **Reputable websites** and articles from recognized institutions and parenting organizations

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Family Systems Theory**

Family systems theory views the family as an interconnected emotional unit where each member's behavior influences the others. Sibling rivalry is understood not as an isolated problem between two children but as a reflection of broader family dynamics, including parenting style, family roles, and communication patterns. Effective intervention therefore requires a holistic approach that considers the entire family structure and seeks to restore balance and healthy relational functioning.

## **Research Methodology**

This review utilized a qualitative approach to synthesize a broad spectrum of literature and expert perspectives on sibling rivalry. Instead of conducting new empirical research, it focused on analyzing and integrating findings from existing studies, professional guidelines, and established parenting frameworks. The goal was to identify effective strategies for managing and reducing sibling conflict.

### **Source Selection**

Sources were drawn from a variety of complementary disciplines, including:

- Child development research
- Developmental and parenting psychology

- Family counseling literature
- Practical parenting guides

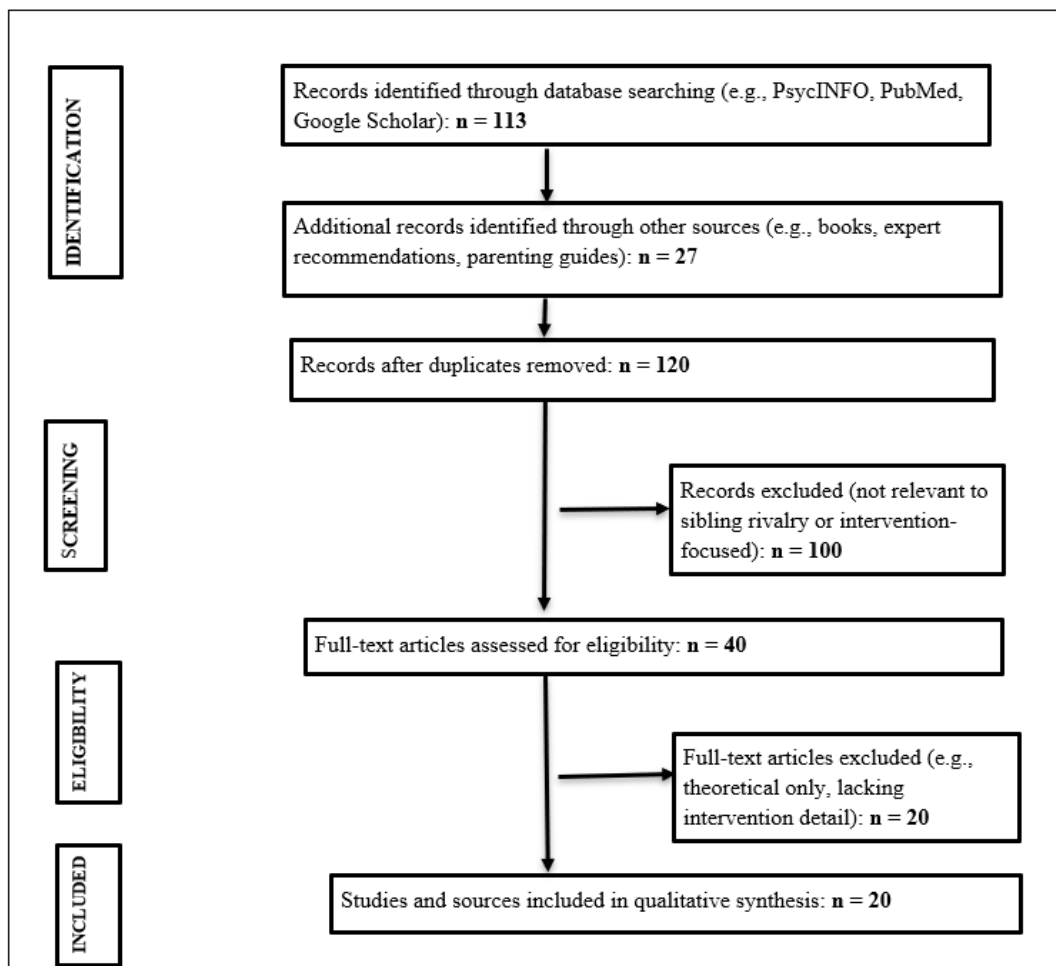
Priority was given to peer-reviewed academic journals, clinical findings, and publications authored by experienced family therapists and child behavior specialists. Reputable books and articles written by parenting educators were also included to ensure practical, real-world applicability.

### Inclusion Criteria

The selection of materials was guided by the following criteria:

- Relevance to sibling interactions and conflict resolution
- Focus on emotional development and family dynamics
- Practical techniques recognized across multiple sources
- Applicability to various family structures

### PRISMA Flow Diagram (Qualitative Review Adaptation)



## Results and Discussion

Seven primary strategies emerged as effective in managing sibling rivalry: promoting individual identity, balancing fairness over equality, teaching conflict resolution skills, providing quality time and positive attention, setting clear boundaries and rules, encouraging parental self-regulation, and utilizing professional interventions when necessary. Each approach contributes uniquely to reducing sibling conflict, fostering emotional intelligence, and improving sibling relationships.

## Findings

### 1. Promoting Individual Identity

One key approach is helping each child develop a strong sense of self. When children feel secure in their uniqueness and valued individually, the need to compete for attention diminishes.

- **Encourage personal interests:** Support activities and hobbies that are unique to each child.
- **Avoid comparisons:** Statements like “Why can't you be more like your brother?” can fuel resentment.
- **Celebrate individuality:** Acknowledge each child's strengths without ranking them.

### 2. Fairness vs. Equality

Children often perceive fairness as receiving identical treatment, but fair parenting adapts to each child's age, personality, and needs.

- **Explain decisions clearly:** For example, “Your sister is older, so she has a later bedtime—for now.”
- **Avoid rigid equality:** Tailor consequences, rewards, and responsibilities to each child's developmental stage.

### 3. Conflict Resolution Skills

- Teaching children how to navigate disagreements constructively can reduce long-term rivalry.
- **Model healthy conflict resolution:** Demonstrate respectful disagreement in adult interactions.
- **Teach active listening and empathy:** Encourage children to articulate feelings and understand others' perspectives.
- **Implement calm-down routines:** Use time-outs for emotions, not just behavior.

### 4. Quality Time and Positive Attention

Children often fight for parental attention. Proactively providing individual time can reduce attention-seeking rivalry.

- **One-on-one time:** Regularly schedule solo activities with each child.
- **Positive reinforcement:** Catch and praise cooperative behavior rather than just punishing conflict.
- **Create rituals:** Special moments like bedtime talks can deepen individual connections.

### 5. Setting Boundaries and Family Rules

Clear expectations help children understand limits and reduce opportunities for conflict.

- **Establish shared rules:** For example, “No name-calling” or “Take turns with toys.”
- **Be consistent with discipline:** Enforce rules impartially and predictably.
- **Encourage shared responsibilities:** Collaborating on chores can build teamwork.

### 6. Parental Self-Regulation

Parents who manage their stress and emotional reactions model control and reduce the emotional tone of sibling arguments.

- **Practice mindfulness and patience:** Staying calm can de-escalate tense situations.
- **Avoid taking sides:** Facilitate rather than referee, helping kids find their own resolutions.
- **Reflect on your own biases:** Unconscious favoritism can exacerbate rivalry.

### 7. Therapeutic and Professional Interventions

In high-conflict families or when rivalry becomes harmful, professional guidance may be needed.

- **Family therapy:** Helps uncover deeper issues and teaches systemic conflict management.
- **Parent coaching:** Offers tools and personalized strategies.
- **School counselors:** Can address rivalry that spills into academic or social settings.

### Conclusion

While sibling rivalry is a natural and often unavoidable aspect of growing up with brothers or sisters, it does not have to be a disruptive or harmful element of family life. On the contrary, when managed properly, it can serve as a valuable opportunity for children to learn conflict resolution, empathy, cooperation, and emotional self-regulation. The key lies in mindful parenting, emotional coaching, and the implementation of structured, consistent strategies that support healthy interpersonal development.

Mindful parenting begins with the recognition that each child is an individual with unique needs, interests, and emotional sensitivities. Parents who take time to understand and honor these differences can help their children feel valued and less likely to compete for attention or approval. Encouraging personal interests, celebrating individuality, and avoiding direct comparisons can go a long way in reducing the triggers for rivalry.

Equally important is the distinction between fairness and equality. Children often assume that equal treatment means identical treatment, which can be impractical and inappropriate given differences in age, maturity, and context. Explaining decisions clearly, adjusting expectations according to individual needs, and

communicating with transparency help children understand that fairness is about meeting their unique needs, not mirroring their sibling's experiences.

Teaching children how to manage and resolve conflict is also essential. Through modeling respectful communication, encouraging empathy, and providing tools for emotional regulation, parents can equip their children with the skills to handle disputes constructively. These skills are not only valuable in the sibling context but also serve them well in school and later life relationships.

In addition, providing children with regular quality time and positive attention helps prevent rivalry that stems from the need for validation. When children feel seen and heard, they are more likely to cooperate and show kindness to their siblings. Setting clear boundaries, reinforcing family rules, and maintaining consistency in discipline also contribute to a stable environment that minimizes conflict.

Finally, recognizing when professional help is needed—such as through family therapy, parent coaching, or school counseling—can prevent sibling rivalry from becoming deeply entrenched or damaging.

### **Acknowledgment**

The preferred spelling of the word “acknowledgment” in America is without “e” after the “g”. Avoid the stilted expression, “One of us (R.B.G.) thanks...” Instead, try “R.B.G. thanks”. Put applicable sponsorship knowledge here; DO NOT place the month first page of your paper or a footnote.

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