

# Oh, brother. Are your children suffering from sibling stress?

Having more brothers and sisters does not always make children happy, suggests a study. Anna Maxted asks the family experts what parents can do to help

**G**rowing up with siblings is, we generally assume, a good thing for children, improving social skills and resilience. But a new study suggests that the more siblings a child has, the worse the impact is on their wellbeing. Having older brothers or sisters or siblings close in age seems to particularly affect mental health.

A study published in the *Journal of Family Issues* called *Number of Siblings and Mental Health Among Adolescents: Evidence from the US and China* looked at data from more than 18,000 adolescents aged about 14. It found that American teenagers with more siblings were more inclined to agree with statements reflecting anxiety and low self-esteem, such as “I certainly feel useless at times” and “at times I think I am no good at all”.

As the mother of three sons (aged 21, 19 and 17) I’m still haunted by my eldest son turning to me when his younger brother was born and saying jealously: “Are you his mummy too?” At least there are a few years between them. “Closely spaced siblings are more negatively related to mental health than widely spaced siblings are,” Douglas Downey, a professor of sociology at Ohio State University and lead author of the study, tells me.

One theory is that time, attention and money are finite and “siblings of similar age compete for similar parental resources”, Downey says, which causes jealousy and conflict. Still, the correlations in the study are “modest”, he says, and it’s not just sibling relationships that are to blame — socioeconomics may be a factor too.

The study cites previous research showing that having siblings enhances abilities such as negotiation, empathy and conflict resolution — skills that benefit mental health long term. And Downey says of his sibling relationships: “My older brothers were ornery [mean] when we were kids but

we get along well now.” This is good news for parents, but if you’d rather not wait until your children are adults for them to get along, there’s plenty that parents can do to reduce rivalry and promote harmony. Here’s what the experts say.

## Don’t label your children as ‘the clever one’ or ‘the funny one’

Defining our children’s qualities is unhelpful and causes conflict. “Parents say: ‘You’re the drama one, you’re the sporty one, you’re the funny one,’” says the therapist Mandy Saligari, the co-founder and clinical director of Charter Harley Street and author of *Proactive Parenting*. “They try to give them an attribute that is theirs alone — it’s a massive mistake, because that creates competition. It means: ‘I’m not allowed to be the arty one if you’re the arty one because that’s your territory.’”

Even referring (as I do) to my “middle child” is comparative because, Saligari says, “he’s neither first nor baby. ‘Second boy’ is better than ‘middle child’ because that gives him his own identity.”

## Stay out of sibling rows, but lay down some rules

Micromanaging rows isn’t healthy for you or the children. “Trust your kids, let them sort it out, let them have their battles, don’t intervene,” Saligari says.

“It’s very healthy to have rivalry with your siblings,” adds Dr Shadi Shahnava, head of family therapy at the Soke private mental health and wellness centre in South Kensington, London. Though, in the interests of largely staying out of it, establish rules early on. “Say: ‘It’s absolutely fine for you to be angry with your sibling. But you do not express anger by hitting or shouting.’” Punching a pillow or screaming into it is fine, she says.

Sibling rows can help kids to learn to compromise and, with adult guidance,



The Duke of Sussex and Prince of Wales

to think of others. But so as not to foster hate, Shahnava says, never tell them off in front of each other (whether they’re 2 or 18). Instead, privately help them to imagine how their sibling felt — “If you knew he’d be so upset you’d never have eaten that last doughnut because you’re so caring and loving.” It builds their ego and makes them want to be good people, she says.

## Don’t feel guilty for treating them differently

Your children may accuse you of favouritism when all you were trying to do was treat them as individuals. Don’t be guilt-tripped. “As a parent we have a duty to respond to each child’s individuality and different needs,” Shahnava says. If they cry, “You don’t do that with me!” say, “No I don’t, I treat you all differently because you’re not all the same.” Shahnava’s elder teenager preferred quiet dinners out. “My younger one was party, party party.” When the elder declared, “You never let me go to parties,” Shahnava said: “Did you ever ask? You always asked to go to fancy restaurants.” Because she refused to feel guilty, knowing she’d done her best, her daughter accepted it.

## ‘It’s not fair!’ Apologies can cure resentment

What if a complaint about preferential treatment is justified? A parent

apologising can heal sibling resentment. “Say: ‘I thought about what you said, and I’m really sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.’ Children love it,” Shahnava says.

Of course, there are times when being fair is really complicated — eg who gets the biggest room in the new house. Not everything is negotiable, but actually that is reassuring for children, she says, and for teenagers too. “You say: ‘Your dad and I have decided this because we think it’s best.’ Of course they’ll say: ‘I can’t believe it.’ You need to say: ‘Yes, well, that’s our decision and there it is.’” Don’t re-enter the discussion — children want parents to take control.

## Don’t compare your teens academically — or let anyone else do it

By the time they’re secondary school age you realise that your children don’t have the same academic ability, which often leads to comparisons, Shahnava says. It’s often unwitting (my husband responded to our youngest’s mock A-level results with: “You’ve got some geniuses in this house who can help you!”). Teachers do this too. “They might say something like: ‘I hope you’re like your sister.’ This puts pressure on the child.” When this was said to her teenager, Shahnava said: “I hope she’s not, because they’re individual people.” Have a quiet word with family too. “Say: ‘I don’t want them to think that we’re comparing them, because we’re not, and I’d like you to tell

“Trust your kids to have their battles. It’s healthy to have rivalry with your siblings



them how proud you are of them individually and not say, 'Your sister this, your brother that ...' "

### Take care of yourself — if kids sense that you are drained they resent each other

Your children's perception of your emotional capacity and how much there is to go round deeply affects how they feel about each other, Saligari says. Look after yourself, because overwhelmed parents inadvertently spread resentment. "You feel, 'Oh for goodness' sake! Another one needs something!' And the third child you've put to bed feels your irritation and that creates competition." She adds: "Envy comes from wanting what someone else has and thinking, 'I'm not allowed it.'" It generates bad feeling. "I see how tired Mum is. I see how stressed Dad is. And I'm looking at my younger sister and thinking, 'Shut up! Stop asking, and anyway I want some attention.'" Take care of yourself, so you can be present, warm, able to say "Gosh that was funny" or "Thanks for helping me" or "I really like that about you". It satisfies their need for your love and reduces resentment.

### New baby? Make your elder child an ally from the start

When a sibling is born, it is vital that you involve your elder child from day one. If you leave their care to grandparents the baby will become a rival, Shahnavaz says. "The child feels completely abandoned and replaced. It's like saying to your spouse: 'Right, darling, I'm going to be kissing my lover in front of you.'"

Try to lightly downplay your adoration of the newborn, she says. "Say: 'I have to change him again. I can't believe it, can you hold a toy and distract him?' Make your [elder] child feel important." At other times, if the baby cries, tell them: "He'll calm down when he sees you." It makes the child think "He loves me," Shahnavaz says, "and that creates a bond."

Don't alter your elder child's routine, and stay involved, she adds. Or say something like: "I'm so jealous of your dad — he's spending so much time with you."

Employing a nanny? "Make sure the nanny is there for the baby, and you can be there for your elder child."

### Your attention is vital to all your kids, so triage them

Parenting isn't about parcelling out time to the exact minute between each child — it's often about prioritising or triaging, Shahnavaz says. Perhaps one needs your help revising for GCSEs and the other, studying for A-levels, is self-motivated. Acknowledge this, and tell your elder child: "I am holding you in mind." Saligari cautions not to inadvertently create a dynamic whereby children think: "Struggle equals time — I've got a stomach ache!" You might tell them: "Let me know if you need anything, because I'm just figuring out how I'm going to spend my time this week." Make them responsible for coming to you. "Meanwhile, you can spend golden time with each child, whatever their age. 'This is when they're in bed, they're snuggled up, they feel safe,'" Shahnavaz says. Knock on their door and ask if you can chat. Even if it's just for ten minutes, "It fills their batteries up."

# My 13-year-old daughter has a more expensive skincare routine than I do

JOHN JAMGERSON FOR THE TIMES

Maria Lally



It's the WhatsApp message every parent of secondary school-aged children dreads getting at about 8am: a panicked request for a forgotten item, be it PE kit or a food tech ingredient. But recently my friend received the following from her 13-year-old daughter: "Mum, help! I've forgotten my Charlotte Tilbury setting spray. Please can you drop it off at school?"

Welcome to the world of parenting tween and teen girls in 2024.

My 13-year-old daughter, Sophia, who has clear, blemish-free skin, has a skincare routine to rival Kim Kardashian's, never mind mine. Unlike my fairly modest collection of creams and cleansers, her dressing table (with Hollywood mirror) heaves under the weight of premium-brand serums, setting sprays, oils, eye masks, exfoliants, retinols and hyaluronic acids.

For the past few years her Christmas and birthday lists have been dominated by £60 eye creams, rose quartz facial rollers and whatever viral, sellout product is favoured by the latest influencer. Her friends are the same. According to the Kids Insights Global Health & Beauty Report by the Insights Family analysts, annual spend on toiletries and cosmetics by UK children aged 10-18 increased in 2021 to £709 million, a figure that's only likely to have risen further still.

Earlier this month dermatologists warned that using anti-ageing products at a young age can damage the skin. Dr Anjali Mahto, a consultant dermatologist who sees teenagers in her London clinic citing TikTok stars as their main source of skincare information, says: "There is a misconception that expensive and intricate products are necessary. It is essential to emphasise that a 13-year-old's skincare routine should prioritise basic hygiene [over] unnecessary complexity."

Try telling that to my daughter and her friends. Their generation have been dubbed the "Sephora kids" because of the boom in children as young as nine hunting through Sephora, Space NK and Boots for brands including Drunk Elephant, Bubble, Glow Recipe, The Ordinary and Charlotte Tilbury that have developed a cult-like following among tweens and teens. Social media is awash with tween skincare "hauls" — videos of children discussing what they have bought or been given.

A friend tells me her 12-year-old's obsession with skincare began when she started secondary school in September. "She FaceTimes her friends and they talk each other through their elaborate skincare routines, wearing their spa-like headbands. It reminds me of the loom-band phase they went through several years ago, but with £50 face creams."

A trained facialist, this friend has told her daughter that all she needs is a good cleanser, some toner and an SPF or moisturiser. "But she doesn't listen to me, only the influencers she sees on TikTok.

I've seen her overload her young, clear skin with five or six different products, with oils on top, which have caused breakouts and congestion. I tell her to keep things simple, but her view, and that of her friends, is more is always more."

"This is a trend I'm seeing a lot of in my clinic and with my own children," says Dr Emma Wedgeworth from the British Cosmetic Dermatology Group. "While I'm pleased that skin health is in the spotlight, I think the appeal of many products to teenagers is based upon the aesthetic packaging, usage by popular influencers or peer pressure, which in my mind are not good reasons to choose what to put on your skin."

She is clear that there is "absolutely no need" to use a multistep skincare routine at this age. "Peels, anti-ageing creams and hyaluronic acid are not necessary. Many tweens and younger teens have a delicate skin barrier with a carefully balanced microbiome and disrupting this may cause irritation."

Mahto now sees a lot of teenagers in her clinic with dermatitis and weakened skin barriers. "Often they've been using strong exfoliating acids like AHAs, BHAs and over-the-counter retinoid products, as well as active ingredients like vitamin C. This is simply not needed at this age, and product overuse can cause severe sensitivity issues long term." Several friends told me of their young teenagers suffering breakouts, redness, dryness and rashes that all improved after simplifying their skincare routine.

My worry is that the potential harm could be more than skin deep. Last year the

Dove Self-Esteem Project found that nine in ten youth mental health specialists believe exposure to beauty content can lead to disordered eating or self-harm among young people. Other studies have found that teenagers are experiencing rising rates of appearance-related anxiety and facial dysmorphism.

"Children are prone to seek out content that's aimed at those older than them," says Tanya Goodin, a tech ethics expert whose book *The Teenage Guide to Digital Wellbeing* is out in May (Collins). "Today's parents are constantly having to grapple with the fact that so much of what their child is looking at online isn't even aimed at their age group, and skincare is an example. Twelve-year-olds don't need retinol, but if a popular influencer is posting about it they'll want to try it. That's how it works."

"I don't think disclaimers or age limits [on packaging] will help — they might even add to

the appeal," says Millie Kendall, the founder and first chief executive of the British Beauty Council. "The answer lies in parents being aware of what their child is looking at on social media and being firm enough to say no to things that aren't appropriate, the industry being responsible, and influencers being responsible. The holy grail is everybody being more attuned to the damage products may cause young skin."

Parents' challenge, Goodin says, is to direct children towards more positive influences. "Take the Lionesses [the England women's football team], who are great role models, or those into activism or other sports. Rather than banning phones, ask your child who they're following and why, and use this as a way to start a conversation about what's age-appropriate and what they could perhaps look at instead. It's not skincare itself that's concerning but rather overfocusing on their appearance."

Wedgeworth agrees. "This age group sees images on social media and may not realise that this is not a realistic view of what skin looks like, and I think excessive scrutiny of skin could be detrimental to their self-esteem and their mental health."

So what should our tweens and teens be putting on their skin? "Sun protection is essential in direct sunlight, and should be used daily between April and October,"

Wedgeworth says. "Treat blemishes [topically] with a mild 2 per cent salicylic acid product or benzoyl peroxide for more severe changes. Other than that, I would advise a gentle cleanser, with a moisturiser tailored to their skin type."

And perhaps a little less time spent on social media while they're at it. Maria Lally



“Calling him your ‘second boy’ is better than ‘middle child’ as that gives him his own identity