

Sibling Rivalry¹

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Siblings can be a wonderful addition to any child's life. When a good relationship is created between siblings, the rewards are extraordinary. Siblings can be there for each other in many ways that parents cannot. They can be playmates, share secrets, help each other learn important social skills, and be lifelong friends.

Even when siblings are best of friends, fighting and disagreements can happen. This is natural. In the process of growing up, children must learn how to build relationships. Parents play an important role in guiding their children to build these healthy relationships. The key lies in teaching children to express their anger safely and appropriately. It also has to do with encouraging cooperation between siblings rather than competition, and valuing each child's uniqueness.

Why Do Kids Fight?

Siblings fight about many things. Don't feel that you are a bad parent if your children fight. Instead, see their fights as learning opportunities for them. Knowing the "why" behind children's fighting will

help you to better understand certain situations and perhaps even avoid some of their bickering. Siblings might fight over possessions, individual space, or just out of plain boredom. Following are other reasons siblings squabble.

1. **Basic Needs.** Make sure your children's basic needs are being met. Children who are tired or hungry can get cranky and are much more likely to start fights.
2. **Attention.** If children feel ignored, they may fight so that parents will notice them. It is hard for children to share their parents with their siblings. Children need to feel a sense of belonging in the family unit. If a desire for attention seems to be the cause for fights, parents need to make an extra effort to reward good behavior as well as to spend more individual time with each child.
3. **Lack Of Experience.** Children lack social competence. For example, a child might pick a fight to get his sibling to play with him. Parents need to teach children to find more appropriate ways of voicing their needs. Parents can teach

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children to put their feelings into words and find safe ways to express their anger.

Encouraging Positive Relationships

Parents can play a major role in building and maintaining a healthy, happy, loving home life. Some ways to build positive relationships between siblings include:

Teach Supportive Communication

Helping children work out their differences involves listening to them and identifying their feelings. When a fight starts, children might feel many emotions like anger, frustration, loneliness, sadness, jealousy or disappointment. Begin by acknowledging your children's feelings toward each other e.g. "You both sound really angry at each other." Listen to each child's side without making judgements of who is right or wrong. Recognize the difficulty of the situation and express faith in their ability to work things out.

Focus on Each Child's Talents

Each child is a special and unique person. Children also need to know that the contributions they make to the family are valued. By focusing on the positive talents each child possesses, parents can build the child's confidence and this can lead to stronger family relationships.

Avoid Comparing Your Children

Children who are compared will often feel resentful and angry both toward you and their sibling.

Avoid using statements such as:

"Why can't you be more like _____?" (sister or brother's name)

"He never makes those mistakes, why do you?"

"Let _____ help you, he does that so well."

"_____ never had these problems, why do you?"

Statements like these can make children feel unloved. They might also feel that they have failed you. Tell your child directly what you want or expect of her without comparing her to her brother. For example, "I want you to finish your chores before going out to play."

Use Positive Reinforcement

Parents are role models for their children. If parents want their children to be loving toward one another, then they must praise that behavior when it happens e.g. "You guys worked as a team, you picked up all the toys before the timer finished." When you praise positive interactions, the likelihood of the behavior reoccurring is greater.

How to Handle Rivalry

The goal for parents is not to rescue their children when they are fighting, but to help them learn to resolve their differences. Parents can equip their children with the skills and attitudes needed for a fulfilling relationship. This is not always easy to do, but here are some suggestions for a parent's role during conflicts between siblings.

1. **Establish Rules.** Make sure that family rules and consequences are well known and understood by each child. Children must know that biting, hitting, and other acts that can cause physical harm are unacceptable. You can teach them to express their anger with words.
2. **Problem Solve.** Teach your children techniques to use when they get angry (walking away, counting to ten, or asking for help). Work on problem solving skills with your children. If you notice that your children are unable to reach a compromise, step in and coach them. First, make sure that they can state the problem. Then ask them what they need to do to solve it. After the children list several suggestions, ask them to agree on a solution. If both children agree on a safe solution, allow them to use it.
3. **Don't Become Involved in Your Children's Conflicts.** When you know your children are capable of solving the problem, avoid getting involved in their conflicts. When you constantly

get involved in your children's conflicts, you become judge and jury. They also become dependent on you to solve their arguments and they may not learn to resolve their own conflicts.

4. **Don't Allow Your Children to Fight in Front of You.** Ask your children to take their fighting elsewhere when you sense they can resolve the problem on their own. Some helpful phrases might be: "I am sure you guys can work that out," "I'm sorry to hear you are upset with each other, but if you are going to argue take it where I can't hear you," and "It is up to both of you to reach a solution."

In summary, parents play a role in determining how siblings get along. Parents can also assist their children in learning ways to resolve their conflicts. Arguments are bound to happen. By teaching children the necessary skills to resolve their conflicts, caring relationships between siblings can be enhanced.

Sibling Abuse

Even though parents should let their children solve their own conflicts, at times parents do need to intervene in sibling fights. Listen to and believe your children when they tell you that they are being mistreated by their sibling. Sibling abuse is something that can happen when fights get too physical. Abuse includes one sibling hitting, biting, shoving, or physically torturing a brother or sister. It can also include excessive tickling. Parents should in no way allow this to occur. If physical aggression is happening, children should be separated. These are signs that sibling abuse is occurring:

1. a child constantly avoids a brother or sister;
2. a child has nightmares, a change in sleep patterns, or a change in eating habits;
3. a child acts out an abusive scenario through play.

If you suspect that something is wrong then it is important that you intervene. Don't minimize or ignore the seriousness of the problem. Take action. A family meeting should be called to discuss the family rules and your expectations of appropriate behavior. Your role as a parent is to create an environment in

which siblings nurture and value each other. You may need to seek professional help to deal with the problem if it continues.

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