

Did You Know?

Dealing with Sibling Rivalry

Sibling Rivalry is one of the most common complaints parents have. None of us feels particularly confident when dealing with conflict between our children. Most of us operate under the illusion that it is somehow possible to *prevent* sibling rivalry, if only we were “better” or more effective parents. Let’s put that myth to rest right now. Sibling rivalry is completely normal and impossible to avoid. It is possible, though, to learn tools for managing it more effectively.

Sibling rivalry occurs for a reason. Children “cut their teeth” on their siblings, so to speak. It’s their first learning laboratory for how to get along with others. They are learning how to assert their power, when to step up, when to back down, how to manage anger, and how to cope with the frustration of not getting what they want—all with their sibs. Did you know that children also fight with each other when they are bored? It’s hard to believe, but lots of times they actually *enjoy* it! They enjoy the contact and the connection. Another reason children fight is to draw us in and capture our attention. Even our negative attention is ‘positive’ to our kids.

When thinking about our reactions to our children’s fighting, it’s important to take a look at our own families of origin. Many of our personal responses are informed by what WE experienced as a sibling.

Reflect back to your childhood: What was your birth position? Who was favored in your family? Which sibling did you have the most conflict with? How did your parents deal with sibling issues? And what did you need, but not receive (such as protection, limits, help, understanding, problem-solving, etc.)?

Often, we repeat certain sibling patterns with our own children. We may overly identify with the child who is most *like* us. Or, we may be quicker to blame the child who reminds us of the sibling we had the most conflict with. What is important is to look at the intensity of our reaction. When we experience intense emotions with one particular child, it often indicates that the problem starts with us. It may be touching an old source of pain. Good parenting means becoming AWARE. When we become aware of our pitfalls, we can start to make changes in our behavior.

On the next page are some practical suggestions for dealing with sibling issues. For the most part, it is helpful to maintain the attitude that children (of similar size) can truly work out many of their conflicts if we don’t jump in too quickly! When we intervene all the time, our kids become dependent on us to stop conflicts from getting too heated. Dr. Foster Cline emphasizes that kids will usually not let things get as far out of control if we’re not there to keep it safe. So, stand back. Try backing up and watching or walking out of the room during the “small stuff.” See if your kids might be able to resolve things by themselves. Do remember, though, that all children need adult protection when a situation is emotionally or physically dangerous.

WHEN DO I INTERVENE?

How to Handle Fighting

I. Normal Bickering

Ignore. (Think about your next vacation!)

Tell yourself your kids are learning an important lesson: how to resolve conflicts.

II. Situation Heating Up—May Need Adult Help

Acknowledge their anger.

Reflect each child’s point of view.

Describe the problem with respect.

Express your confidence that they can work it out.

III. Situation Possibly Dangerous

Inquire: ‘play fight’ or ‘real fight’?

Let them know if it’s not fun for both, it must stop.

If it’s too rough for you, tell them they need to find a new activity.

Facilitate problem-solving if needed.

IV. Situation Definitely Dangerous—Adult Intervention Necessary

Describe the situation.

Establish limits.

Separate both children for a ‘cooling off.’

- Brothers and sisters need to have their feelings about each other acknowledged.

...with WORDS that identify the feelings

("You sound furious!")

...with WISHES

("You wish he'd ask before using your things.")

...with SYMBOLIC or CREATIVE ACTIVITY

("No hurting your sister. You can show me your feelings with your doll.")

- Children need to have their hurtful actions stopped...

("Hold it. People are not for hurting.")

...and be shown how to discharge angry feelings acceptably.

("Tell him with words how angry you are. Tell him you don't like it when he takes your truck without asking.")

- Children need to be treated uniquely, not equally!

DESCRIBE the PROBLEM, instead of comparing.

("I see a brand new jacket on the floor.")

Give in terms of NEED, instead of worrying about giving equal amounts.

("I know it's not easy to wait. When I'm finished helping Lisa, I want to hear everything you have to say.")

Show children how they are LOVED UNIQUELY, instead of claiming equal love.

("You are the only 'you' in the whole wide world. No one could ever take your place.")

- Siblings need protection from being cast in roles...especially from being the BULLY or the VICTIM.

Instead of treating the child as bully...teach him to be civil.

("Shawn, you know how to use your words. Now tell her what you need.")

Instead of treating the child as a victim...show her how to stand up for herself.

("Kimberly, tell your brother, 'That's mine. Daddy bought it for me. I can decide if I want to share.'")

(Source: *Siblings Without Rivalry*)

Books on Sibling Rivalry

Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, Avon Books.

Help! The Kids Are at It Again: Using Kids' Quarrels to Teach "People" Skills by Elizabeth Crary.

He Hit Me First by Louise Bates Ames and Carol Haber, Warner Communications.

My Brother, My Sister and Me: A First Look at Sibling Rivalry by Pat Thomas, Macdonald Books. (FOR KIDS)

A Pocketful of Kisses by Audrey Penn, CWLA Press. (FOR KIDS) This book is about Chester, the Raccoon!