

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

One of the greatest challenges of parenting is raising siblings. Parents not only have to find ways to let each child know they are special and loved, but they also need to help them learn how to share and cooperate. Ultimately, parents hope that they will lay the foundation for their children to become a strong sense of love, support, comfort and pleasure for each other as they journey into adulthood. Studies have shown that sibling rivalry is the second leading cause of distress and concern among parents, first being behavior problems, which are often difficult to separate from sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry is of major concern to parents for many reasons. Not only does it add stress to family life, but it leaves parents feeling incompetent about their parenting abilities, that they have done or not done something to cause the problem. Parents worry about underlying causes of anger and aggression, and about the lasting effects that such rivalry will have on their children in adulthood.

WHY DO SIBLINGS FIGHT

What do siblings fight about? Everything and nothing. Some fights are for simple reasons, others more complex. Not every fight siblings have is about something of major importance. Not all fights are the result of an underlying emotional disturbance. Sometimes siblings just fight. Some of the more typical reasons include:

- Siblings fight because they are siblings. When there is more than one child, conflicts are inevitable. The closer in age, the more likely there will be ongoing fighting. There are usually fewer problems when there are six or more years between siblings.
- Siblings fight because they enjoy it. Sometimes children find fighting fun. They enjoy teasing each other and getting on each other's nerves.
- Siblings fight because they have nothing better to do. Children typically fight less when they are engrossed in an activity. Sibling rivalry increases dramatically when children are bored. Think about your last two hour car ride with your children!

The majority of children's fights are due to these reasons. However, some sibling conflict is generated by emotions your child is experiencing. By being aware of these issues, parents can help their children reduce the severity of these conflicts.

- Siblings fight because they are competing for parental attention. This is most commonly seen with the arrival of a new baby. Siblings also experience jealousy when parents become involved with the activities of one child, such as coaching a team or being a classroom volunteer.
- Siblings fight because they are unable to share. Children are expected to share lots of things, but that does not make it an easy task. When feelings of jealousy are present, sharing becomes even harder.
- Siblings fight because they are concerned about fairness. Children keep track of whether their parents treat each one equally.

As irritating as sibling rivalry is, it is not without its merits. Fighting among siblings creates opportunities for them to grow and develop. Children gain practice in the skills necessary for problem solving and conflict resolution within the security and acceptance of their own home. These experiences help children as they learn how to function outside their own family.

BASIC SKILLS

Siblings need four basic skills to get along with each other. Interestingly enough, it is these same skills which children need to develop in order to get along with others. Children learn these skills at different rates. Some seem to be born knowing how to get along well, others learn by trial and error on their own and some need help to learn. Parents are instrumental in teaching these skills to their children, and there is no better place to do this than within the security and forgiving atmosphere of the home.

1. **Achieving Belonging.** We all feel the need to belong and children are no different. For children, attention and recognition are signs of belonging. If they do not get these things, they do not feel as if they belong. Consequently, children will do whatever it takes to be recognized, even if it means testing the limits and infuriating their parents. Strange as it may seem, children will prefer negative attention (being yelled at or punished) to no attention at all. Sometimes they are looking for attention from parents and other times from a sibling. Parents need to help their children develop skills to seek attention in constructive ways. Parents can do this in many ways including:

- Give children messages that affirm belonging ("I like to be with you")
- Let your child know it is okay to ask for attention
- Decide on how you want your child to ask for attention
- Give attention to appropriate behavior

2. **Setting and Respecting Boundaries.** As children begin to grow and develop, they realize there are some things they have control over and some things they do not. Parents need to teach their children that there are different kinds of boundaries (personal, those relating to possessions, space, thoughts and time) and that they may change over time. Parents can help their children establish and maintain boundaries by:

- Giving words to establish their boundaries ("Ask me before you take my crayons", "I'm not done playing with ...", "Don't tickle me, it hurts.")
- Teaching your child to move himself or his things. If his sister is knocking over his Legos, he can move to another room. If her brother is drawing on her paper, she can work on the kitchen table. If someone is touching him, he can move his seat.
- Teaching children to get help. If someone is hurting a child or bothering her things and she cannot get them to stop, then she needs to get help.
- Respecting children's boundaries. This includes seeing that others respect your child's boundaries too. If your child does not want to hug Aunt Edna, don't insist upon it.
- Model setting clear boundaries. If your child hits you, be sure to make it clear to her the first time that it is not appropriate, and give her an alternative behavior like "make nice" or "rub my face."
- Create and enforce family rules about boundaries. Stop when someone says "stop." Ask before you use something that belongs to someone else. Keep your hands and feet to yourself.
- Be clear about what possessions belong to each child and which to the family. Children become angry when they are forced to share things which belong to them.

3. **Dealing with Feelings.** Children need to understand their feelings, because unless they do they will be unable to cope with them in appropriate ways. Children also need to learn that other people have feelings too. Siblings naturally present many ways for children to learn how to respond to the feelings of others. The skills they learn within their own family will be invaluable over the course of their lifetime as adults. Parents can help children develop these skills by being a model and a coach.

- Use feeling words whenever possible.
- Label your own feelings. "I am happy to see you sharing crayons with your sister." "I am angry that you tore your brother's paper."
- Reflect your children's feelings. "You feel left out because she doesn't want to play with you." "You feel sad because he broke your truck."
- Distinguish between feelings and behavior. Children need to learn that expressing all feelings is okay, but acting on those feelings in ways which hurt others are not. "It is okay to feel frustrated but it is not okay to hit Rachel."
- Teach skills to deal with feelings. Children need to be taught how to handle themselves when they are angry, and how to problem solve.

4. **Problem Solving.** Children may not always be able to control every situation in life, but they can control how they respond to them. Children need to be taught a sense of personal power and parents can help them to develop this by modeling negotiation and cooperation with their partner as well as in their own interactions with their children. Parents can also help facilitate negotiation among siblings by following these guidelines:

- a. Acknowledge each child's anger
- b. Reflect each child's point of view
- c. Describe the problem with respect. Show appreciation for the difficulty of the problem.
- d. Express confidence in the siblings' ability to find their own solution.
- e. Leave the room.

WHAT TO DO WHEN CHILDREN FIGHT

In spite of all your best efforts, your children will fight. How you approach these situations will impact your own stress level as well as how your children respond to your actions.

Bickering and Minor Disagreements. Minor arguments and daily bickering are enough to drive any parent crazy, but in and of themselves, they hold little meaning. Often it is best to let these minor issues go, and allow children the opportunity to solve them on their own. It helps to remember that most siblings fight, and they fight a lot. Put some space between you and the children if their issues become too distracting. Resist the urge to mediate their battles. If they get into the habit of relying on you to step in and solve their problems, they will never learn how to work things out through compromise and cooperation. When they come to complain to you, turn the problem back to them and encourage them to work it out themselves. It may help to:

1. Acknowledge their anger and their problem. "I can see you are both very angry. You want to watch one video and you want to watch something else."
2. Let them know you are confident they can work it out. "I am sure you two can come up with a solution that is fair for both of you."
3. If necessary, give them a warning-and a choice. "Remember the house rule: keep your hands and feet to yourself. If you cannot follow this rule, I will have to give you both a ten minute time-out from these toys. It is your choice. Play together without yelling or shoving or lose the privilege of playing with these toys."
4. Don't encourage tattling. In the heat of battle, children often try to involve their parents by tattling. You can discourage this behavior by not giving it much attention, and instead, redirecting the tattler by making a simple statement such as "It is too bad you two are not getting along."

You Need to Step In:

- when fighting becomes physical
- when verbal attacks become personally hurtful and ego-damaging
- when the situation becomes uncomfortable or unbearable
- when you are at your wit's end and find yourself losing control
- when you need peace and quiet in the home

If you are going to intervene, your words and actions need to convey to your children that you are getting involved because of their inability to make better choices about their behavior. Describe the trouble that you are seeing and what will be done to stop the fight. Depending upon the situation, you may warn your children that they must either end the fight immediately or they will be separated and face the loss of certain privileges. If the fighting persists, give them time-outs in separate rooms. Then most importantly, follow through with logical consequences. In many sibling conflicts, logical consequences are the most effective way to let your children know that their behavior toward each other affects them as a whole, not just individually. The loss of the video privilege for both, regardless of who started the fight, has far greater impact in the future on their attempts at resolving their own conflicts. Most importantly, if you fail to back up your warnings with actions, your words will be meaningless and you will lose all power to control the situation, this time and in the future.

CREATING A POSITIVE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

A positive family environment has an impact not only on sibling conflicts but on all of your family interactions. A home filled with mutual respect and consideration, where children feel valued, special and unique, is a place where children can grow and become responsible, caring adults. There are many ways to create such an environment. The following ideas are things which foster such an environment while also promoting positive feelings between siblings.

1. Take time each day to make each child feel special. Time alone with each child, several times a week is essential, especially given the hectic pace of many families today. Children thrive on intimacy with their parents. Studies have shown that across the age groups, when offered a reward, children prefer time alone with their parents to toys, movies or sweets. The connection and nurturing they receive from such encounters allows them to be more tolerant of their siblings at other instances.

2. When spending time with one child, don't talk about the other. If you take your child shopping, keep the focus on them, and avoid the temptation to say things such as "Look at that green shirt, wouldn't that look great on Susie? Let's buy it for her." You may think you are encouraging the child to be thoughtful of their sibling, but more than likely she will think that even when away, the other sibling takes your attention from them.

3. Children often experience praise of a sibling as a put down of themselves. Don't ignore individual accomplishments but be sensitive to the feelings of others. Tie their accomplishments into what you think the *child* might be feeling, or what they accomplished and *not how you feel* or *who you will tell*. Save those expressions of encouragement and support for when you are alone with that child.

4. Let each child know what it is about him that his siblings like or admire. Very often, children are unaware of the underlying positive feelings they have for one another. Sharing some of their positive feelings for each other can cause a dramatic shift in their relationship.

5. Don't cast children into roles within the family based either on their position (oldest, middle, youngest) or their abilities (the athletic one, the smart one, the musician) but allow them each the opportunity to experience some of the privileges, responsibilities and opportunities of the other. Once you identify them in a given role, it often becomes a self fulfilling prophecy. Be flexible in your thinking and avoid comparisons as much as possible. Anything you want to tell your child can be done without comparisons. Instead of suggesting he be more like Joey, or practice like Julie, or read like Danny, *describe* what you see, what you like, and what you don't.

6. Don't get trapped by togetherness. As children grow, families go through various stages where sometimes, the interest and ability of siblings are poorly matched, resulting in a constant irritation between siblings. Time spent together may be more pleasurable if adults pair off with children in various combinations, rather than forcing togetherness. This allows for more age appropriate activities, individual time, and less resentment among siblings. By contrast, total family outings may serve to drive the siblings further apart, instead of encouraging them to work through their differences.

Overall, it is important to recognize that sibling relationships are not consistent, but rather are a constantly changing process. At different stages of their lives, brothers and sisters will be close or move apart. As parents, there is nothing we can do to guarantee they will have a close, loving and fulfilling relationship. Our challenge is to provide them with the skills to communicate and feel empathy for others, and to promote an environment that is safe and accepting, so they can reach out to one another. The family is where we learn early on about being in a relationship and caring for others. The way we relate to our children and how we teach them to relate to each other, is what they will carry with them when they venture out into the world.

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