

PARENT SERIES

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Sibling Rivalry

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“Mom, he’s bothering me!”
“She hit me first!”
“Da-a-a-d, he won’t share!”
“It isn’t fair!”

If there are two or more children in your family, you are very likely to have heard one or more of these cries for help. Conflict between siblings is common and can happen as often as seven or eight times an hour.

The conflict may include hitting, kicking, name-calling and other types of verbal or physical aggression. This behavior usually succeeds in getting parents’ attention. Obviously, managing sibling conflict can strain even the most patient parents.

It’s important to remember that sibling relationships offer many positive learning and other opportunities for children. Brothers and sisters can help each other with important social and cognitive skills like problem-solving, negotiation, sharing, patience, and frustration-tolerance. Older siblings often nurture, share with, help, comfort and cooperate with younger siblings. Younger children can become attached to older siblings, and in turn, make the older child feel important and knowledgeable.

However, it’s also true that aggressive behavior by one sibling leads to increased aggression by the other. Siblings can learn not only how it feels to be attacked or put down, but also how to get their needs met without bloodshed.

Factors Influencing Sibling Relationships

The Child’s Temperament

Difficult temperament characteristics such as intense emotional responses, high activity levels, impulsivity, and low persistence are associated with negative sibling relationships. Expect more conflict when both siblings have difficult temperaments. These active, impulsive children give each other more opportunities to react to minor slights or frustrations with quick, loud screams or hits.

Treating Children Differently

All parents treat their children differently, in large part because children at different ages have different needs. For example, a 2-year-old child must have a parent supervise bath-time, while the 5-year-old may be expected to bathe independently. Likewise, a younger child needs to go to bed earlier than an older child, who may even be allowed to sleep over at a friend’s house.

The increased freedom of adolescence is often hard for the younger child to tolerate. This differential treatment may lead to a child’s belief that the parents have a favorite, resulting in increased fighting or “unfair” statements. Since the child’s perception may not match the reality of the situation, parents should not be too quick to respond to these complaints.

Marital Distress

Parents who experience marital problems may find that their children fight more than usual. The children may be modeling the parents' conflict, or their anxiety over the parental conflict may cause them to be less tolerant of each other. They may also be seeking parental attention to reassure themselves that they are still important to their parents.

Life and Environmental Stress

Children often react to stress by fighting with brothers and sisters. Types of stress include worries about an exam or a fight with a best friend. This is similar to adults who, after a bad day at work, come home and yell at the children for minor infractions, such as not cleaning up their snack dishes, or not putting away their book bags. Likewise, family stresses such as financial problems, unemployed parents, or moving, may increase sibling conflict.

Parental Intervention

When parents help mediate their children's conflicts, sibling strategies to resolve conflict are more constructive. They're more likely to result in compromise or reconciliation rather than win-lose solutions. However, some types of parental interventions, such as trying to determine "who did what to whom," may foster the idea that a parent is taking sides. That can increase rivalry. This may also promote children's dependence on parents to solve the problems.

Sibling Bullying

Sibling bullying is an act of aggression that is often repeated, and involves physical and verbal attacks such as hitting, pushing, kicking, biting and name-calling or hostile arguing. **Never tolerate verbal or physical attacks or teasing, baiting or cruel behavior.**

Parents might accept sibling bullying as a normal part of growing up, but this mindset may perpetuate the bullying. The long-term negative impact on the self-esteem of the victim of sibling bullying can be significant. This behavior should not be tolerated or accepted as "normal." If the problem's basis can't be discovered and quickly resolved, then seek professional help.

Siblings in Stepfamilies

Blending families can be difficult for parents and siblings. Each blended family is unique. Factors such as age, number of children, custody arrangements, and the birth of a mutual child can influence step-sibling relationships. Combining families may mean setting new rules and expectations for children. It's helpful to clarify these rules from the start.

Loyalty conflicts are a common issue among siblings in stepfamilies. Children in blended families feel loyal to their biological parents, so when a biological parent is criticized by step-siblings or step-parents, they're quick with defensive responses. Likewise, parents must be careful not to favor their biological children. Parents should address criticisms and teach respect to help siblings integrate into the new family.

Enhancing Sibling Relationships

Parents can do many things to decrease the number and intensity of sibling conflicts.

Rearrange the Daily Schedule

Are there specific times of day or specific situations when your children are more likely to fight? Take steps to prevent squabbling at these times. Rearrange the schedule. For instance, serve dinner earlier,

have the siblings take separate baths, or have them select separate activities — one colors while the other watches TV. If all else fails, keep the children apart for the duration of these “high conflict” times.

Let each child have some privacy

Let each child have some privacy, and a few things that don't have to be shared. Provide a location for each child to store these special things with the understanding that if they are in that location, they cannot be used by anyone else. Toys left in common areas, and that are not being played with by the owner, are available to everyone.

Reduce Stress

Find ways to cope with or reduce family stress. If, for example, driving children from one activity to another increases pressures at home or increases fights in the car, then decrease the number of your children's activities. Fewer activities are better than constant bickering that stresses parents. Try to establish a dependable daily routine so the family knows what to expect, and when.

Change Expectations

If an older and younger child are not getting along, decrease the times the older child is in charge. If you need childcare, it's best to hire a sitter.

If your children have good relationships, then the older child may be left in charge. Be sure to let the older sibling know:

- What you expect him or her to do, such as preparing snacks, reading a book before bedtime, or paying attention to the younger sibling — versus talking and/or texting on the phone.
- How to behave in a positive way — letting the younger sibling choose a snack or book; or speaking in a pleasant, non-condescending voice.
- What to do if the younger sibling does not behave as expected — in a calm voice, let the younger child know that he or she is expected to go to bed at a certain time. Otherwise, all activities will stop, and the parents will be told about the disobedience.

Periodically ask your children if they feel you have a favorite. If they say that they feel you do, then ask your children what it is that you do that makes them think that. Ask what you could do to make each of them feel special.

Provide Clear Expectations

Be clear and specific about what you expect of your children. This is best done when the children are behaving in a pleasant way or having fun together.

I noticed that when John asked you to use the bike, you let him do it without fuss. That was great. You are learning a lot about sharing.

The three of you are sharing toys so well in the sand box, and for the last 10 minutes you had no fights. That is great. It gave me time to finish the dishes, so now I have time to watch you play.

Let the Siblings Provide the Solution

Telling children to “stop fighting and play nicely” does not usually work. A good alternative is to ask the children to tell you what the problem is, what they want, and what they can do to get what they want. This often results in specific solutions for them to try.

Ignore Low-Level Squabbles

Try to increase your tolerance level for sibling minor disagreements. Let children work these out themselves. If they can't, separate them for a short period, or put both children in time out.

Remove the Object of the Argument

Take the disputed toy or turn off the TV until the children can negotiate taking turns. There should not be a lot of discussion around this, but handle it rather matter-of-factly.

Since the two of you cannot seem to decide how to share, I am taking the toy (or turning off the TV) until you can figure out a way to take turns. Let me know when I can give it back to you.

Reward Good Behavior

Use shared rewards for cooperative play or the absence of squabbling. If fighting occurs, neither child gets the reward. Sometimes it's necessary to make a chart to break a negative cycle, and get a more positive cycle going. If you make a chart, clearly define what behavior you want. Be consistent in monitoring and rewarding the behavior. For example, explain that each child will earn a sticker for cooperative behavior, such as sharing. Once they reach a certain number of stickers, they can get a reward. However, if they are caught squabbling, then you will have to take a sticker away.

Reward your children when they resolve tension in ways that are polite and mutually beneficial. Even when this reward is simply acknowledging their behavior, let them know that you are proud of their efforts. Point out the ways in which their problem-solving skills were adaptive and healthy.

That was a great idea to take turns watching your favorite TV show. You both did some good negotiating with calm, inside voices.

Be sure that everyone who cares for the children knows how you are trying to handle the sibling conflict, and ask them to use the same strategies.

Teaching New Skills

Teach problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills such as ignoring, negotiating, compromising, expressing angry feelings appropriately, and when all else fails — walking away from the situation. Have each child define the problem as he or she sees it and come to an agreement about what the problem is.

Okay, Mary, you want to watch Scooby Doo. John, you want to watch Pirates. So you each want to watch a different TV show.

Have the children generate alternative solutions for the problem.

*We could watch half of each program.
John could watch his program today, and Mary could watch her program tomorrow.*

Evaluate the pros and cons of each alternative.

*Watching half of the shows would be fair, but it is not fun to watch just half of a show.
We could record one TV show to watch later.*

Model appropriate problem-solving skills. Tell your children about everyday problems and how you resolved them.

Dad wanted to go see one movie and I wanted to see a different one. We couldn't decide which one to go to so we checked to see when they were playing and the cost of each one. They both cost the same, so we chose the one that got us out earlier. It was Dad's movie, but he let me choose where we went for a treat after the movie.

Time-Out

Use time-out for physical or verbal aggression, regardless of who did what to whom. It is usually not possible to see or hear exactly what happened, so it is best to send both children to time-out without further discussion. While this may not seem fair, it teaches children that they both better work on solving the problem or they both will be punished.

- Send the children to separate places for three to five minutes of time-out.
- No discussion should occur after you have said, "Go to time-out." Ignore all pleas, arguments and explanations.
- If squabbling persists on the way to time-out, add minutes to the time of whoever is squabbling.
- Time-out starts for each child when he or she is quiet. Use a timer if needed.
- If the conflict persists when time-out is over, return both children to time-out.
- When children are unable to resolve the conflict themselves, teach problem solving skills, but do this only when the children are calm.

Help children develop individual interests and activities

Each child is unique and it is important to take the time to acknowledge and support his or her interests with your attention and time. When children have different interests, competition is decreased and everyone can acknowledge the fun each has with the activity.

Resources

Books

Bratty Brothers and Selfish Sisters: All About Sibling Rivalry. R.W. Alley. Abbey Press/One Caring Place, 2007. An illustrated storybook about sibling conflicts and emotions.

Beyond Sibling Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Become Cooperative, Caring, and Compassionate. Peter Goldenthal. Holt Paperbacks, 2000. A guide for parents describing how rivalry comes about and what parents can do to help siblings get along.

Online

Sibling Rivalry

http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/sibling_rivalry.html

Handling Sibling Rivalry

http://childdevelopmentinfo.com/ages-stages/school-age-children-development-parenting-tips/sibling_rivalry/

This handout was based on the Schroeder, CS; and Gordon, BN (1994) *Sibling Rivalry*, in the Parent Series, Chapel Hill Pediatric Psychology, N.C.