

Sibling Rivalry and Conflict: Helping Your Children Get Along More Often

by Karin Suesser, PhD, Psychologist

If you are the parent of more than one child, you know how exhausting it can be to listen to your children's bickering, name calling, teasing, or even physical fighting with each other. In addition, siblings often show jealousy and competitiveness with each other over issues that may seem trivial to parents, such as who has more peanut butter on their sandwich or whose t-shirt is the reddest. While some level of conflict occurs in any relationship between people who have to share the same living space for extended periods of time (think of marriages!), sibling rivalry often leaves parents feeling tense, angry, exhausted, and inadequate. Fortunately, there are several ways to reduce conflict and competition between siblings and to help them get along a little more often. Thinking of conflicts as "teaching moments" rather than "stress" can be a first step.

Fighting, Teasing, Bickering

When your children fight with each other, it can be difficult to decide whether you should step in, or let them work it out on their own. Make a plan ahead of time for how you would like to handle different situations so you can stay clam.

Have clear family rules about behavior.

Describe what will not be tolerated (e.g., hitting, name calling etc.) and spell out specific consequences for breaking the rules. For example, children may have to pay a reasonable fine (such as 50 cents) each time they insult a brother or sister. A child who hits another may have to do a chore or some other nice thing for the sibling.

Give each child individual time and attention.

Research shows that 15-20 minutes of one-on-one time with a parent each day can reduce fighting between siblings. Let each child know you like spending time with them alone because they are special to you, and you enjoy their company.

Ignore bickering.

It's a proven fact that kids will fight longer and louder when they have an audience. Leave the room and let them work it out. Tell yourself that they are learning important lessons about conflict resolution.

Catch them being good.

When your children are playing together without fighting, this is not the time to catch up on reading or paperwork because it's finally quiet. Instead, bring them a snack, and say, "I am really happy to see that you are playing together so well." Paying attention to their cooperation and showing your appreciation will encourage them to continue the positive behavior.

Stop hurtful actions immediately.

When children are fighting physically, separate them into different rooms to calm them down. Once calm, have them sit at opposite ends of a couch or table, and tell them that they won't be able to leave until they have worked things out by talking. At first, they may need your help to learn compromise. Teach them problem solving skills, such as "Let's list 5 ideas for how you can resolve

this issue- which idea would work best?" Over time, they will learn important skills for negotiating on their own.

Show children how to express angry feelings appropriately.

Remind children that it's okay to be angry at a sibling but it's never okay to hit or insult others. Expect them to express their anger in appropriate words. Say, "you sound furious- but I expect you to confront your sister without calling her names" or "Tell your brother how angry you are with words, not fists" – then make a brief suggestion for how they could put their anger into words until they learn to do it by themselves.

Acknowledge your children's feelings about each other.

Empathy for how your children feel can go a long way toward soothing their hostility toward each other. Simple statements such as, "Your brother really hurt your feelings" or "You wish that she had asked your permission before using your things" show understanding, and children will feel less compelled to prove their point by arguing or fighting.

Jealousy and Competition

Children compete for the time, attention, love and approval that parents have to give. Many parents tend to believe that they should treat siblings the same, and give them the same amount of attention, treats, and material things. This is not only impossible, but it can actually make the problem worse because it encourages children to compare and find inequality somewhere. Instead, try the following:

Focus on each child's individual needs.

Help your children figure out what they need themselves rather than focusing on what their siblings have. When they complain, "You gave him more juice than me," don't try to explain that you gave them exactly the same amount. Instead, respond by asking whether they are still thirsty, and how much juice they might need.

Don't treat them equally, treat them uniquely.

Children usually don't believe it when you tell them that you love them all equally. Instead, let them know what you think is unique about each one, and why they are special to you. The more specific you are, the easier it will be for your child to feel appreciated for who they are, instead of trying to compete with a sibling.

Resist the urge to compare.

Even when you have the best intentions not to compare your children to each other, you might say things that make a child feel like they are better or worse than a sibling, encouraging competition and jealousy. Try to describe their actions or characteristics without any reference to a sibling's behavior. Instead of saying, "Your brother is already dressed – what's taking you so long?" say "You are not dressed yet and it's time to go."

Recommended Readings:

Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish (1998). *Siblings Without Rivalry*. Paperback, 250 pages.

Peter Goldenthal (1999). *Beyond Sibling Rivalry*. Paperback, 237 pages.

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