

Sibling Rivalry is Healthy and Normal . . . to a Point

If you ever lived with a brother, sister, or multiple siblings, you probably have stories to tell about the times you and your sibling(s) drove each other crazy with teasing, terrorizing, and tattling on each other. Sibling conflict is common and pretty normal. Personality differences, temperament differences, and competition for resources and attention are inevitable vexations between children who share a home and family.

The good news is that there are benefits to your kids' annoying sibling squabbles, as long as they don't get too abusive. The primary benefit is that kids get a lot of experience coping with conflict, conflict management, and conflict resolution – especially if they are lucky enough to have loving adults in their lives who are ready with a little even-handed guidance and refereeing when necessary.

The bad news is that the parents can unintentionally (or intentionally) aggravate the rivalry between their kids by pitting one child against another with favoritism, comparing one to another, or sharing more quality time and affection with one than another. When sibling conflict is a result of competition for and jealousy over parental love and acceptance, it can get ugly, and the relationship-straining results can be long lasting.

If your kids' fights seem to be getting out of hand or rarely end with satisfactory resolutions, consider how you can make some adjustments in your own behaviors and strategies to help them get along.

Parental Intervention

Here are some things you can do to help your children work through their conflicts:

- As long as your children aren't hurting each other or otherwise abusing each other, hang back and let them try to

work out their own compromises and solutions. Try not to get drawn in to a position of taking sides. If you do intervene, do so with the goal of helping them find win-win solutions.

- Do your best to avoid demonstrating a preference for one child more than another. Parents often have preferences because of shared or differing interests, personality traits, and temperament; but it's not good to let children know there are preferences.
- Don't let the children hear you comparing them to one another (e.g., "Johnny has his father's long legs, but poor Susie inherited my stubby thighs," or "I wish Mary liked sports as much as Bobby, but she'd rather stay in her room and read.") Comparisons tend to imply that the strengths of one are weaknesses of another.
- Plan and carry out frequent family activities with the children. Look for activities that everyone can enjoy and participate in so that children grow up with pleasant memories of good times with their siblings. Choose some activities that do not involve competition, with winners and losers.
- Spend some one-on-one time with each child. Ask the child questions about his or her interests and opinions and try to listen without judgment or criticism. Get to know your children as individuals and express appreciation for who they are.
- Pick a time when the kids are not arguing and ask them to work with you to set some rules and guidelines for "fair fighting." One rule should be to keep conflict verbal not physical; let them know that violence is not acceptable. Guidelines can include

avoiding name-calling, avoiding tattling, taking turns talking, and listening to each other's side. Talk to them about problem solving skills such as compromise, coin flipping, taking turns. Ask them to think of times when these or other skills would have helped them solve a problem.

- Involve the children in deciding consequences for breaking the rules. When the rules are broken, be firm and consistent about enforcing the consequences.
- If a fight breaks out, don't get involved unless the rules they agreed to are broken. If they break the rules, review the rules with them. Ask what problem solving skills might help resolve the problem. Encourage them to talk about their feelings instead of calling each other names or making threats.

Listening to children argue can strain your nerves. You might feel like taking them to separate rooms and locking the doors, but good communication and conflict management skills are not learned in isolation. Do your best to keep your cool. Most importantly, set a good example using healthy conflict management and problem solving skills in your own relationships with others. Hopefully, peace in your home will reign more often.

Problems? Call the Student Assistance Program (SAP) and arrange to talk to a counselor. Contacts are confidential within legal limits and available at no cost to students and their family members.

Call (515) 244-6090 or (800) 327-4692.
TTY: (515) 288-9022 or (877) 542-6488.
