

Parental Strategies to Reduce Sibling Rivalry

Healthy kids fight. It's a fact of life. In fact, if your children are getting along 50% of the time, they are doing better than the average family! Remember, the sibling relationship is the longest one in life and not one of choice.

Arriving at the point where brothers and sisters enjoy and appreciate each other is a long, slow and sometimes painful process. The Gesell Institute in their book He Hit Me First, states that after the age of 16, siblings can spend much of their time in agreement.

Remember that much important growth and development happens within this complex family structure over those first 16 years. Dr. T. Berry Brazelton points out that sibling rivalry "can be a major spur in children's learning to live together, learning how to share, how to win victories and suffer defeats, how to love and how to cope with their own unloving feelings. Failure to learn these lessons in childhood may make it far more difficult, and emotionally costly, to learn them later as adults"

So we know sibling rivalry is normal. We also know it's exhausting. The following are some strategies to help minimize fighting.

- Spend time alone with each child every day. This can be as little as 15 minutes. You can carve out your alone time by staggering naps, doing an errand with only one, staggered bedtimes, etc. Stay focused and present with your child and refrain from talking about the other siblings. Not only is the warmth and intimacy of private time with a parent essential to building a child's self-esteem, it can also cut down on the need to get attention by misbehaving. If the child knows that he will have time alone with you, he is less likely to pick a fight with his sister to get you to notice him.
- Treat each child uniquely, not equally. To be loved equally is somehow to be loved less. When everyone is treated the same or "fair", no one is special. So instead of giving equal amounts -- "Here, now you have just as many grapes as your sister"--, give according to individual need -- "Do you want a few grapes, or a big bunch?"
Instead of showing equal love--"I love you the same as your sister"--, show the child he is loved uniquely--"You are the only 'you' in the whole wide world. No one could ever take your place."
Instead of giving equal time--"After I've spent ten minutes with your sister, I'll spend ten minutes with you"--give time according to need--"I know I'm spending a lot of time going over your sister's homework. It's important to her. As soon as I'm finished, I want to hear what's important to you."
- Acknowledge children's angry feelings. When angry feelings are heard and accepted, a child's rage is diminished. You can acknowledge angry feelings with words that identify the feeling: "You sound furious!" You can also acknowledge feelings with wishes: "You wish he'd ask before using your things". Even a symbolic or creative activity can acknowledge feelings: "How would you feel about making a 'Private Property' sign and hanging it on your closet door?"

- Help children express feelings with words. Children's hurtful actions and words need to be stopped. Then children need to be shown how to discharge angry feelings acceptably. "Tell him with words how angry you are. Tell him, 'I don't want my skates used without my permission!'"
- Resist the urge to compare. Instead of comparing one child unfavorably to another, "Why can't you hang up your clothes like your brother?" speak to the child only about the behavior that displeases you.
Describe what you see--"I see a brand new jacket on the floor."
Describe what you feel--"That bothers me."
Describe what needs to be done--"This jacket belongs in the closet."
Instead of comparing one child favorably to another, "You're so much neater than your brother", speak only about the behavior that pleases you.
Describe what you see--"I see you hung up your jacket."
Describe what you feel--"I appreciate that. I like seeing our hallway looking neat."
- Attend to the injured party instead of giving attention to the aggressor. By giving your attention to the 'victim', you send a strong message that aggression will not be rewarded with parental attention. For example, sister bit brother. Rather than scolding sister immediately, go to brother. "Let me see. Oh my, it's all red. That must hurt. People are not for biting. Your sister needs to learn to ask for what she wants with words. Even when she's angry. Come, let's put some ice on your arm". Parent is addressing the victim but is saying things for both their benefit. After brother feels better, parent can remind sister the rules regarding biting and help her to make amends to her brother.
- Create a cooperative climate. The more competitive games you have in your home, the more friction you are likely to have. Competitive kids often must be number one at all costs. The more cooperative games you have, the less friction you are likely to have in your home.
- Separate and soothe. Protect your siblings against each other when it's necessary. At times the littler ones may need protection against the bigger ones and the reverse also holds true!
- Be proactive. Deflect brewing problems, especially during the late afternoon or other times when children tend to be tired and cranky. A story, bath, snack, change of environment or physical activity can be really useful.
- Share selectively. Let your children have the right not to share new or precious toys, to hold on to a toy for a reasonable length of time if they're truly using it, and to keep some of their things in a personal place that's off limits to everyone else. Even sharing can sometimes be too much of a good thing.
- Don't get trapped by "togetherness". Everyone needs time with friends, time with siblings, time with parents, alone time, family time. No one wants to be with someone 24/7. Time away from each other can make time together more fun.
- Allow private play dates. For even the most generous child, sharing friends with a sibling may be too much to ask. Allow your children to play alone with their friends, but make sure the excluded sibling is prepared and has an alternative, enjoyable activity. You can also set up the play date so that sibling is included in

the play for one hour. Then the child with the friend can expect to play without the sibling's involvement. The key is being clear with your expectations.

- Keep out of your siblings' wrangles whenever possible. Kids develop confidence and self-reliance when they learn to settle their quarrels by themselves. Parents who solve problems for their kids rescue them, giving kids the message that they cannot handle their own problems. As parents, we are not here to resolve our children's conflicts. We must give them the nonviolent tools to handle their own problems. Generally, children are able to start problem solving on their own around age 3, when they are quite verbal. Until then, our job is to give them words, and strategies for problem solving by modeling and supporting them. Parents will not be able to begin staying out of their children's squabbles until the children are capable of problem solving.
- Reassure younger children that someday they, too, will be big enough to have all the privileges and prerogatives enjoyed by the older ones. Meanwhile, point out the advantages they enjoy now.
- Share some of your own childhood feelings about brothers and sisters. Children love to hear stories about when their parent was little. It's another way to validate your child's feelings about their own siblings.

Resources:

1. He Hit Me First, When Brothers and Sisters Fight by Louise Bates Ames and Carol Chase Haber
2. Kids Can Cooperate by Elizabeth Crary
3. Raising Brothers and Sisters Without Raising the Roof by Carole and Andrew Calladine
4. Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
5. Touchpoints by T. Berry Brazelton
6. Winning at Parenting by Barbara Coloroso
7. Peaceful Parents, Happy Siblings by Laura Markham

