



Understanding Children

Sibling Rivalry



You have a headache and the dog is barking. You cannot get the sales person off the phone and you can see the long list of chores posted on the refrigerator door. On top of everything else, your kids are fighting like crazy with everything they've got—biting, scratching, and throwing toys.

■ Fighting among young children

Constant fighting, put downs, and arguing among children cause frustration and concern in most parents. Although sibling rivalry can have several reasons, brothers and sisters often fight to get the attention of parents or to show power or superiority over another child.

Some bickering is normal among brothers and sisters. Constant arguing, fighting, and creating potentially dangerous situations, however, are not normal. The following are some ideas to help reduce your frustration over quarrelsome siblings and lessen the fighting too.

■ Let siblings express their feelings about each other

When children complain about each other, parents often try to talk them out of their feelings. ("You shouldn't be mad at your sister," or "Stop complaining. He's the only brother you have.")

Instead, acknowledge their anger or frustration. Let your children know that you understand their anger. That can help them feel better and even treat another child better.

Use this as a tool to lessen sibling rivalry in several ways. Identify the angry child's feelings with words, ("You sound furious! You wish he'd ask before using your things.") and suggest symbolic or creative activity ("Would you like to draw a picture of how mad you feel?").

You may be surprised at how quickly the anger disappears when you let your children know that you're aware of, and understand their frustration.

Jennifer has two sons, Jimmy, 5, and Danny, 4, who had trouble getting along since they were very little. Playing together often ends in grabbing toys, calling each other names, and complaints to Jennifer. At an evening class on parenting, Jennifer heard that kids fight less when the parent describes what the kids might be feeling. It seemed too good to be true, but Jennifer decided to give it a try. The next time Danny came to complain about Jimmy, Jennifer said, "Sounds like you're feeling pretty mad at Jimmy." To her amazement,



Danny looked puzzled for a minute and then said, "Yeah, I am mad at him." She then heard Danny go to another room and play by himself.

■ Don't compare your children

It's natural for parents to notice that one child is more cooperative or better behaved in some ways than another child in the same family. Comparing siblings, however, does not encourage better behavior, but intensifies jealousy and envy. It also is likely that the child you compare unfavorably may want to get even with the child you praise.

Instead of comparing one child unfavorably to another, comment only on the behavior that displeases you. ("I see a brand new jacket on the floor. That bothers me. This

jacket belongs in the closet." instead of "Why can't you hang up your clothes like your brother?")

Also, avoid praising one child at the other's expense. ("You're sure better at picking up your toys than your brother.") The child you're praising may feel sorry for the sibling you are criticizing or the child may feel superior and look down on the other child.

Sherry and John have 3 children — Mark, 6, Julie, 4, and Todd, 1. Sherry, in her concern for Julie as "the middle child," got in the habit of pointing out Julie's good behavior to Mark. For instance, she would say, "Mark, look how Julie is cleaning up her plate. See if you can finish your dinner, too." One day when Sherry asked the kids to pick up toys, she heard Mark say to Julie, "I'm not going to pick up anything. You're the one who does everything right."



Sherry then made a commitment to stop comparing Mark to Julie. The next day when she saw Julie hanging up her jacket and Mark dropping his on the floor, she resisted the urge to compare the children and said to Mark, "I see a coat on the floor that needs hanging up."

■ Treat children individually, not equally

Parents sometimes believe that the best way to avoid arguments and unhappiness among their children is to give equally to each child. New clothing for a child often is matched with something new for the siblings too. Spending time with one child often means trying to spend an equal amount of time with the other.

This practice of attempting to give equally to all the children only encourages comparisons by the children who often feel cheated. No matter how hard you try to make things the same—portions of favorite food, time spent, or gifts given—children are bound to find some way that you're not being fair.

Children feel special and valued when you give to each according to individual need. Instead of telling children that you love them equally, privately point out their special qualities that have nothing to do with others in the family. ("I love spending time with you" or "You're the only one like you in the whole world and I love you.")

■ Don't take sides

Resist the urge to figure out who started the fight. Parents often believe that the older or stronger child started the fight and should be punished. Often it's nearly impossible to tell who started the fighting. Even very young children can start a fight when you're not looking, in the hope that you will punish the older child.

Even if you are sure who started the fight, taking sides only makes things worse. The "victim" may feel pleased to have you on his or her side, but the one who is blamed probably will want to get even with the other child. Avoid frequent blaming of one child for starting fights as it may make the child feel like a "bad apple" who cannot get along. Even if punishing the one who started the fight may stop the behavior temporarily, it may lead to resentment or poor self-esteem in the long run.

Instead of taking sides, comment on the behavior you can observe. ("I see two kids fighting" instead of "Bobby, leave her alone.")

Larry and Sue were concerned about the possibility of 3-year-old Lisa injuring the baby, who was 1½. If the children were in the same room and the baby started crying, Larry assumed that Lisa was picking on him and usually sent her to her room.

When the situation grew worse, Larry talked to his sister. She thought that Larry might be making things worse by punishing Lisa. She suggested separating the children when the baby cried without scolding or punishing Lisa. Next time the baby cried when Lisa was near him, Larry simply moved the baby to a different spot and said nothing to Lisa. After a few weeks of

separating the children without assigning blame, Larry and Sue noticed that Lisa and the baby were getting along better.

■ Let children work it out for themselves

Your children may still argue or bicker. The more you can stay out of their minor fighting, the sooner they will learn to settle their differences themselves. Remember the three Bs.

1. **Bear it.** Ignore the fighting as long as you can. Turn on some music and pretend you're not even aware of the bickering.
2. **Beat it.** When you can't ignore it any longer, go to another room where you can't hear it as well. Your children may get the message that you're not going to settle things for them. Some parents try the "bathroom retreat" in which they lock themselves in the bathroom with some reading material for a short time while the fighting continues. Obviously, this option does not work when you are concerned for the safety of an infant or when children are out of control.
3. **Boot 'em out!** Ask the children to take their fighting somewhere else. ("If you two kids need to fight, please do it outside where I don't have to hear it.") When children know you're not going to take sides, the fighting often settles down quickly.

Remember, these ideas only are appropriate when the fighting is minor and does not appear to be dangerous.

Bob and Ellen loved being parents to their two daughters, aged 5 and 6, except for one thing—the fighting

between the girls. Bob had grown up getting along well with his older brother and Ellen was an only child. It was hard for them to accept their daughters' competitiveness and constant fighting. The fighting was so upsetting to Ellen that she would try to settle the arguments the minute they started.

After reading an article in the newspaper on sibling rivalry, Bob suggested to Ellen that they try letting the girls work out their problems themselves. Since both Bob and Ellen worked outside the home, the problem was in the evenings and on weekends. They decided to ignore the fighting as long as they could. When Ellen wanted to settle an argument, she was to get Bob and do something around the house with him to distract herself.

Bob sat down with the girls and explained the new plan. He said, "Mom and I have decided that you two are old enough to settle your own arguments. When you have a problem, we're going to leave it up to you to come up with a solution. Mom and I are going to stay out of it." Things seemed to get worse for a few days, but after a while Bob and Ellen noticed that the fighting was happening less often.

■ Step in when children cannot work it out

Step in during fighting between brothers and sisters in the following situations:

- when the same fights happen over and over with no resolution,
- when the fighting is serious and may be dangerous.

If the children fight over the same issues day in and day out even after you have given opportunities for

them to work it out, you may need to teach conflict resolution skills. Do this when everyone has calmed down and avoid taking sides.

For example, teach children how to use a timer to take turns with a plaything. Teach social skills by showing them how to ask someone nicely rather than grabbing or yelling. Also, ask both children in the situation for their ideas on how to solve the problem between them. Even children as young as 4 or 5 can come up with useful ideas.

■ Stop dangerous fighting

When sibling rivalry turns into real fighting in which one or both children may be injured, parents must step in. A parent's job is to protect children from fighting that could lead to physical or emotional damage. The following steps can help you deal with problem situations without choosing sides.

1. Describe the situation you see. ("I see two sisters who are getting ready to hurt each other.")
2. Separate the children. ("This looks dangerous. Sally, you go to the front yard and Janey, you go to the back.")
3. Wait for a cooling down period.
4. Listen to each child's point of view and acknowledge feelings.
5. Work out a possible solution together for dealing with the problem in the future.

At times, fighting that starts as a play fight turns into a serious fight. Let children know that it's only a play fight when both children agree that it's in fun. When one child is not having fun, the fighting must stop.

Laura was worried about the fighting between her two sons, aged 6 and 4. The fighting got worse after the divorce and had Laura concerned about Joey injuring his younger brother, John. One day she heard John cry out and saw Joey clutching a pair of sharp scissors, ready to use it like a dagger on John. She grabbed the scissors and spanked John, but she knew that it would happen again unless she figured out a better way to handle it.

That night, Laura called her friend, Jeanne, who had three sons of her own, and asked for her advice. Jeanne had seen Laura's boys in dangerous situations before and she gave Laura this advice. "You've got to do something to keep your boys safe, Laura. Spanking and yelling doesn't seem to help. What worked with my boys was to separate them without scolding anyone when the fighting got bad. Then, when they had calmed down, I would talk to them and let them come up with ideas of how to solve the problem that had led to the fighting."

Next day, when Joey was holding John down and pinching him, Laura said, "I see somebody getting hurt. John, you go to the TV room and Joey, you play in the kitchen." She knew the problem wasn't over, but at least she had prevented injury and hadn't made Joey feel like getting even with John later on.

■ Give yourself time

The stories at the end of each section make it sound as if the fighting can stop like magic if only you do the right thing. Realistically, it takes time and persistence for you to learn new ways of treating your children, and for them to learn new ways of getting along. Don't give up. It may even seem like it's getting worse before it gets better.

Learn to let your children express their feelings, avoid comparing them, and treat each child as an individual. Their relationships are bound to improve. It is possible for you to remain neutral and yet teach your children to stop fighting and handle differences. Remember that when you help your children get along better, you are preparing them for important relationships in the future with co-workers, spouses, and even their own children.

■ References:

- Positive Discipline, Jane Nelsen, Prima Publishing, 1989.
- Perilous Rivalry: When Siblings Become Abusive, Vernon Wiehe, McMillan, 1991.
- Siblings Without Rivalry, Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish, W.W. Norton, 1987.

Written by Virginia Molgaard, Ph.D., extension human development specialist. Illustrated by Lonna Nachtigal. Graphic design by Valerie Dittmer King.

File: Family life 8

... and justice for all

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply

to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Issued in furtherance of

Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Jack M. Payne, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.