

Dealing with Sibling Rivalry

Sibling rivalry is usually about jealousy. Most of the time, the children are trying to get attention from an adult in their lives. Do you regularly reassure your children they are loved and wanted? When was the last time you spent some one-on-one with each child? Are there things in the schedule that need to be cut back so there is more family time? For time-crunched families, use travel time in the car and fifteen minutes at bedtime to really connect with and cuddle your child.

Start with deciding family rules at a family meeting (post them publicly if you want or have each kid sign the “contract” in agreement): no name calling, no hitting, no damaging property. Make sure kids know the penalty for breaking these--losing tv time, going to bed early, getting a phone taken away, having to do something nice for the other person, doing an extra chore, etc. Choose your battles. What are non-negotiables in your family?

Know when to step in and when to let the kids resolve the conflict themselves. Step in only if health or safety is threatened. Calling a time out and sending kids to separate rooms is a good way to let emotions settle. If the weather is nice, send one kid outside for a “fresh air break”. Let the kids know you are confident they can work it out. If one child is usually being picked on or there is a big size or age difference, think about allowing the child to have a lock on their bedroom door so they have a safe place to go, especially when you aren't around.

If you decide to play referee, give each child a chance to present their side without interruption. Have them use “I” statements about what happened and how they feel (rather than let them play the victim or blamer and put it on someone else). Then brainstorm multiple solutions-- for instance, setting a timer so each child gets the same amount of time on the computer or in the bathroom--and decide on the best one. Start with the phrase “How can we....” and make the session solution focused instead of complaining.

Does your child feel there is an area where he or she is “special” and not being compared to another sibling? Make sure each child has outside activities and friends that do not involve the other sibling. Familiarity really does breed contempt sometimes! Stress cooperation in the family instead of competition. For example, if the family goes bowling and reaches a total score of 500, everyone gets ice cream. Or playing a cooperative game (like Hanabai) as a family. When it's time to pick up toys, offer a reward for everyone if they can work together to “beat the clock” and get the room cleaned up. Or do something peaceful (meditation, taking a walk, camping, or yoga) together as a family.

Notice patterns. Do the conflicts happen in the morning? When they are hungry? When they are tired or bored? Around holidays? Have a new toy? Don't be afraid to take away electronics or monitor what video games or tv is being watched if you notice a spike in fighting. Kids are often influenced by what their brains see and will consciously or unconsciously imitate it. Assign each child their own “day” each week where they get the front seat of the car or get to pick the movie or choose the

restaurant the family eats at that day. It eliminates a lot of arguments and trying to remember who got to do it the last time!

Acknowledge feelings of feeling left out or things not being fair or feeling frustrated. If a child feels heard, it can lessen the intensity of their feelings. Remind them often of the Golden Rule--treat others as you would like to be treated--and acknowledge when you see them behaving in that way. Create a kindness jar and fill it with a cotton ball each time you see the kids doing something good. When there are _____ number of cotton balls in there (or it reaches the top), everyone gets a special treat.

Use the restorative practices the kids are already familiar with from school. Ask the four questions: What happened? How did this affect you? What was your part in it? What are some solutions? This encourages kids to use their brains and their words instead of their fists!

Emphasizing gratitude and helping others can make children kinder as a whole. And remember, how parents resolve conflicts is a powerful role model for kids. It's ok for you to also let your child know how their behavior is affecting you : "I am finding it hard to enjoy being home because of all the fighting. I need us to figure out a better way to handle this. It's not fair to the rest of the family who have to listen to this." Keep your parenting consistent and present a united front so the kids can't play you against each other.

Some kids fight because they are very different from each other. Some fight because they are too much the same. But if you can figure out what benefit the kid is getting from the behavior and find a different way to give it to him or her, your home can become much more peaceful and sane. Other suggestions:

- Create a "Cool Off List" of things for kids to do separately when conflict starts
- Figure out the root of the conflict. Talk about negative vs. positive attention.
- List positive ways to connect with each other: doing a photo shoot together, working on a project for the other parent(washing the car?) or the community (collecting cans of food for the food bank), running a lemonade stand together, doing a trash pickup together, teaming up to build a clubhouse or make cookies
- Name five things you like about the other person. Sometimes kids don't think their sibling even likes them!
- Hold hands until you can be nice to each other, sit nose to nose, wear an extra large tshirt together, or hug until you laugh.
- Try to become a peacemaker instead of a warmonger (MLK, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, etc)
- Have someone you admire guide you around what they would do (superhero, saint, favorite grandparent, positive character from a movie or book, etc)
- Set up a chart and get a star for every day there is no conflict with a reward after a certain number of days (or days in a row).
- Send them to summer camp together--most kids will enjoy the change of scenery and will often WANT to hang around their familiar sibling (and bonus--you all get a break from each other!)

Book resource: Siblings without Rivalry