

## Sibling Rivalry

Sibling rivalry is a common dilemma for families and maintaining peace can often be difficult. Although siblings can be the closest of friends, it is rare to find a child who gets along perfectly with his/her siblings. Brothers and sisters fight - it's the natural ebb and flow of family life. Different personalities and ages play a role and siblings often see themselves as rivals, competing for an equal share of family resources (like the bathroom, the last piece of cake, a favourite seat in the car). Sibling rivalry is a normal part of growing up, but it can be one of the leading causes of stress for parents (and kids). Have you wondered how to minimise the disputes? Knowing when and how to intervene can make a difference in how your children relate to each other. Here are a few ideas on understanding and managing sibling rivalry.

Sibling rivalry typically develops as siblings compete for their parents' love and respect. Moderate levels of sibling rivalry are a healthy sign that each child is able to express his or her needs or wants.

As your children get older, the way they interact is likely to change. While younger children tend to fight physically, older children are more likely to have verbal arguments. Competitiveness between siblings typically peaks between ages 10 and 15 and sometimes sibling rivalry can continue on into adulthood.

Ideas to improve sibling relationships?

- **Avoid comparisons.** Children feel hurt and inadequate when compared to their sibling/s. Children make their own comparisons clearly enough without a parent confirming these. Don't discuss the differences between children in front of them.
- **Set the ground rules.** Be clear what behaviours you accept and those you find unacceptable when it comes to interacting with each other and be a strong model of the behaviour you would like your children to demonstrate. Children should know what the consequences of their unacceptable behaviour will be.
- **Don't get involved in sorting who is to blame.** Think Switzerland, be neutral and don't put much focus on figuring out which child is to blame. It takes two to fight — anyone who is involved is partly responsible. Remember if you tell the kids how to settle it, you create a winner and a loser, and if they settle things themselves, it's a negotiated settlement. Don't focus on figuring out which child started the poor interaction and which is to blame. They are fighting and using unacceptable behaviour - that's the bottom line. Give a consequence to both/all children involved. While you might need to help younger children resolve disputes, you can still refrain from taking sides. When possible, take your child aside to discuss his or her behaviour to avoid shame and embarrassment.
- **Anticipate problems.** If your children regularly argue about the same things, recognise this and plan ahead by devising a solution before it happens next time. eg. If your children battle over gadgets/toys/seat in the car, help them create a weekly/daily schedule. Explain the consequences of not following the schedule.
- **Listen to your children.** Allow your children to vent their negative feelings about each other. Try not to use the "Why...?" question as children will rarely be able to answer, but rather ask "What happened...?", "What is fair in this situation?", "How

are you going to resolve this?" Acknowledge your children's feelings as you notice them eg. "You both sound really angry." This is emotion coaching which we have written about in a number of articles in the past. "I can see you are feeling.... right now." Then rephrase the problem as you heard it. eg. "Tom wants to ..... and Sophie is ..... How can you kids settle this?" If you have siblings, share stories of your own childhood conflicts.

- **Encourage good behaviour.** When you see your children playing well together/making good decisions or choices or working as a team, be sure to compliment them. Often we forget to comment when things are going well and fall into the habit of intervening only when behaviour is negative!
- **Show your love.** Spend time alone with each of your children. This is a wonderful gift you give your children; better than spending money on them. It's what childhood memories are based on. Do special activities with each child that reflect his or her interests. Consider holding regular family meetings to give your children a chance to talk about and work out sibling issues. Perhaps establish a program where the kids earn points toward a fun family-oriented activity when they work together to stop battling. Remind your children that you're there for them and they can talk about anything with you.

Remember, all siblings fight or argue. Squabbling siblings are learning how to value another person's perspective, how to control aggressive impulses, express emotional feelings, give in, negotiate, cope with feelings of jealousy, be angry with someone they love, compromise, and if all else fails - coexist. These are valuable lessons; so valuable that parents of one child must provide playmates and play situations so an only child can learn them.

By treating your children as individuals, listening to them and giving them opportunities to resolve their own problems, you'll lay the groundwork for solid sibling relationships.

More information on this topic can be found at:

[http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/sibling\\_rivalry\\_video.html](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/sibling_rivalry_video.html)

[http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/sibling\\_rivalry.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/positive/family/sibling_rivalry.html)

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/fighting.html>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyiving/sibling-rivalry>

We wish you little sibling squabbling so that you may relax and enjoy the break connecting with your children. For those of you whose children we have worked with during the year, we thank you for your trust and partnership in helping to achieve high well-being in our students.

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

[gbath@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:gbath@smc.tas.edu.au)

[amaver@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:amaver@smc.tas.edu.au)

School Counsellors

