

Reducing Fights between Brothers and Sisters

You're home from work after a long day at work. You're hungry and tired and it's time to fix supper but the kids are at it in the kitchen, fighting over whose turn it is to set the table. You had hoped that by this age there'd be less arguing but now, at ages 9 and 13, your kids are fighting more than ever. Will they ever outgrow the yelling, arguing and fighting over everything?

This scene probably is a common one. Constant fighting, put downs, and arguing among children cause frustration and concern in most parents. Although sibling rivalry can have several causes, brothers and sisters often fight to get their parents' attention or to show power and superiority over one another. Although you may never eliminate all sibling rivalry, this publication offers ideas to help.

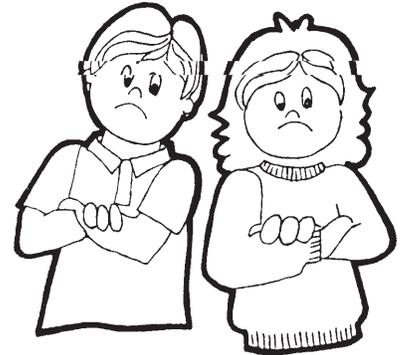
Some bickering is normal among brothers and sisters. Constant arguments, fights, and creation of potentially dangerous situations, however, are not normal. Here are ways that might reduce your frustration over quarrelsome siblings and lessen the fighting, too.

Let siblings express feelings

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 angry or frustrated feelings. Let your child know that you understand this anger because it can help your child feel better and possibly treat the sibling better, too.

Use this method to reduce fighting: (1) identify the angry child's feelings with words, and (2) suggest symbolic or creative activity.

When your daughter gets angry at her younger brother, you might say, "You sound furious! You wish



he'd ask before using your things." Then suggest that she write about her feelings in her journal. A younger child might like to draw a picture of mad or angry feelings. You may be surprised at how quickly the anger disappears and problems seem to be resolved.

An example

Linda has two sons, Ben, 15, and Adam, 10, who have had trouble getting along since they were very young. Playing often ended in grabbing toys, calling each other names, and complaining to Mom. As a teen and preteen, Ben and Adam still are fighting over television, the bathroom and telephone. At an evening class on parenting, Linda heard that siblings fight less when the parent describes feelings. It seemed too good to be true but she decided to try it. The next time Adam complained about Ben, Linda said, "Sounds like you're feeling pretty mad at Ben." To her amazement, Adam looked puzzled for a minute and then said, "Yeah, I am mad at him." Then Adam went to another room to play by himself.

Don't compare siblings with each other

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

Comment only on the disagreeable behavior. ("I see a new jacket on the floor and it bothers me. Your jacket belongs in the closet," instead of, "Why can't you hang up your clothes like your brother?")

Avoid telling one child that a sibling is better at something. ("You're sure better at picking up your toys than your sister.") That child may feel sorry for the sibling you criticized or may feel superior.

Individual but not equal

Parents sometimes believe the best way to avoid arguments among their children is to give

equally to each child. New clothing for a child often is matched with something new for the siblings. Spending time with one child often means trying to spend an equal amount of time with the other.

This practice encourages comparisons by children and they may feel cheated. No matter how hard parents try to make things equal—portions of favorite food, time spent, or gifts given—children are bound to find something that's unfair.

Children feel special and valued when you give to each according to individual need. Instead of telling children that you love them equally, find ways of telling each child special things about himself or herself that are unique and 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," or "I like the special way you do this.")

An example

Susan and Bill have three children, Jamie, 16, Lisa, 14, and Brent, 11. Susan, in her concern for Lisa as "the middle child," always pointed out Lisa's good behavior to her younger brother. One day when Susan asked the children to pick up in the TV room, she heard Brent say to Lisa, "I'm not going to pick up anything. You're the one who does everything right." Susan decided to stop comparing Brent to Lisa. The next day when she saw Lisa hanging up her jacket and Brent dropping his on the floor, she resisted the urge to compare the children and said to Brent, "I see a coat on the floor that needs hanging up."

Don't take sides in sibling fights

Resist the urge to figure out who started a fight. Parents often believe that the older or stronger child started the fight and should be punished. The fact is that it's nearly impossible to tell who may be at fault. 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 that you have sided with him or her, but the one who is blamed will probably want to get even with the other child. Avoid frequent blaming of one child for starting fights because this may make the child feel like a "bad apple" who cannot get along with

others. Even if punishing the one who started the fight may stop the behavior temporarily, in the long run it may lead to resentment, poor self-esteem, or more quarrels.

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

An example

Phil and Karen were concerned about the possibility of 12-year-old Jeremy injuring their daughter, Julie, who was 9. If the children were in the same room and Julie started crying, Phil assumed that Jeremy was picking on her and usually sent him to his room. When the situation only got worse, Phil talked to Karen, who thought that Phil might be adding to the problem by punishing Jeremy. She suggested separating the children, without scolding or punishment, the next time Julie was upset. A day later, when Julie complained that Jeremy was too close to her, Phil simply asked the kids to play in separate rooms. After a few weeks of separating the children without assigning blame, Phil and Karen noticed that Jeremy and Julie were getting along better.

Let children work out differences

Despite your attempts at peace-making, your children may still argue or bicker. The more you stay out of minor fights, the sooner they will learn to settle their differences themselves.

It helps to remember the three B's when parents deal with sibling arguments:

■ 1. Bear it.

Ignore the fighting as long as you can. Turn on 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 their arguments 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 reading material for a short time while the fighting continues. Obviously, this option does not work

When to step in

Step in during fighting between brothers and sisters when the children can't work out their differences. Getting involved is always appropriate in the following situations:

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

If the children fight over the same issues day after day, even after you have given them opportunities 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 the television. Teach social skills by showing them how to ask someone nicely rather than grabbing or yelling. Also, ask both children in the situation for ideas about ways to solve the problem.

when you are concerned for the safety of a small child 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 fighting is minor and does not appear to be dangerous.

An example

John and Shirley loved being parents to their two daughters, ages 13 and 8, except for one thing—their fighting. John had grown up getting along well with his older brother, and Shirley was an only child. It was hard for them to accept their daughters' competitiveness and constant fighting. The fighting was so upsetting to Shirley that she would try to settle the arguments the minute they started.

After reading an article in the newspaper on sibling rivalry, John suggested to Shirley that they try letting the girls work out their problems themselves. Since both John and Shirley 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 Shirley wanted to settle an argument, she was to get John and do something around the house with him to distract herself. John sat down with the girls and explained the new plan.

He told them, "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, John and Shirley noticed that the fighting was happening less often.

An example

Melissa was worried about the fighting between her two sons, ages 16 and 12. The fighting had gotten worse after her divorce, and Melissa was concerned that Andy would hurt her younger son, Sam.

One day Melissa heard Sam cry out and saw Andy gripping a ball bat, ready to use it on Sam. She grabbed the bat and sent Andy to his room, knowing that it would happen again unless she figured out a better way of handling it. That night, Melissa called her friend, Diane, who had three sons, and asked for her advice.

Diane had seen Melissa's boys in dangerous situations before and she gave Melissa this advice. "You have to do something to keep your boys safe, Melissa. Punishing 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."

The next day, when Andy was holding down Sam and twisting his arm, Melissa said, "I see somebody getting hurt. Andy, you go to the TV room and Sam, you take your game into the kitchen." She knew the problem wasn't over, but at least she had prevented injury and hadn't made Andy feel like getting even with Sam later on.

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 physical or emotional injuries. The following steps can help you deal with problem situations without choosing sides:

■ 1. Describe what you see.

You may say, "I see two sisters who are getting ready to hurt each other."

■ 2. Separate the children.

"This looks dangerous. Sally, you go the front yard and Janey, you go to the back."

■ 3. Set a cooling down period.

"It looks like you're both upset. We'll talk about it later."

■ 4. Listen to each child's point of view and acknowledge feelings.

"John, you think it's Amber's turn to do the dishes and Amber, you say you did them last night."

■ 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 with angry feelings and the possibility for injury. Let children

know that it's only a play fight when both children agree that it's in fun. The minute one child is not having fun, the fighting has to stop.

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 can 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 probably will improve. It is possible for you to remain neutral and yet teach your children to stop fighting and handle their 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.

For further reading

■ *Positive Discipline* by J. Nelsen from Sunrise Books, 1-800-456-7770.

■ *Perilous Rivalry: When Siblings Become Abusive* by V. Wiehe, McMillan, 1991.

■ *Siblings Without Rivalry* by A. Faber and E. Mazlish, W.W. Norton, 1987.

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