

About Sibling Rivalry

What is sibling rivalry?

Sibling rivalry is the jealousy, competition and fighting between brothers and sisters. It is a concern for almost all parents of two or more kids. Problems often start right after the birth of the second child. Sibling rivalry usually continues throughout childhood and can be very frustrating and stressful to parents. There are lots of things parents can do to help their kids get along better and work through conflicts in positive ways. Read on for tips and resources to help you keep the peace at your house.

What's the up-side of having more than one child?

Most likely your kids' relationship will eventually develop into a close one. Working things out with siblings gives your children a chance to develop important skills like cooperating and being able to see another person's point of view.

What causes sibling rivalry?

There are many factors that contribute to sibling rivalry:

- Each child is competing to define who they are as an individual. As they discover who they are, they try to find their own talents, activities, and interests. They want to show that they are separate from their siblings.
- Children feel they are getting unequal amounts of your attention, discipline, and responsiveness.
- Children may feel their relationship with their parents is threatened by the arrival of a new baby.
- Your children's developmental stages will affect how mature they are and how well they can share your attention and get along with one another.
- Children who are hungry, bored or tired are more likely to become frustrated and start fights.
- Children may not know positive ways to get attention from or start playful activities with a brother or sister, so they pick fights instead.
- Family dynamics play a role. For example, one child may remind a parent of a relative who was particularly difficult, and this may subconsciously influence how the parent treats that child.
- Children often fight more in families where parents think aggression and fighting between siblings is normal and an acceptable way to resolve conflicts.
- Not having time to share regular, enjoyable family time together (like family meals) can increase the chances of children engaging in conflict.
- Stress in the parents' lives can decrease the amount of time and attention parents can give the children and increase sibling rivalry.
- Stress in your children's lives can shorten their fuses, and decrease their ability to tolerate frustration, leading to more conflict.
- How parents treat their kids and react to conflict can make a big difference in how well siblings get along.

How can I help my kids get along better?

The basics:

- Don't play favorites. This one is a "biggie".
- Try not to compare your children to one another. For example, don't say things like, "*Your brother gets good grades in math — why can't you?*"
- Let each child be who they are. Don't try to pigeonhole or label them.
- Enjoy each of your children's individual talents and successes.
- Set your kids up to cooperate rather than compete. For example, have them race the clock to pick up toys, instead of racing each other.
- Pay attention to the time of day or other patterns in *when* conflicts usually occur. Are conflicts more likely right before naps or bedtime or maybe when children are hungry before meals? Perhaps a change in the routine, an earlier meal or snack, or a well-planned quiet activity when the kids are at loose ends could help avert your kids' conflicts.
- Teach your kids positive ways to get attention from each other. Show them how to approach another child and ask them to play, and to share their belongings and toys.
- Being fair is very important, but it is not the same as being equal. Older and younger children may have different privileges due to their age, but if children understand that this inequality is because one child is older or has more responsibilities, they will see this as fair. Even if you did try to treat your children equally, there will still be times when they *feel* as if they're not getting a fair share of attention, discipline, or responsiveness from you. Expect this and be prepared to explain the decisions you have made. Reassure your kids that you do your best to meet each of their unique needs.
- Plan family activities that are fun for everyone. If your kids have good experiences together, it acts as a buffer when they come into conflict. It's easier to work it out with someone you share warm memories with.
- Make sure each child has enough time and space of their own. Kids need chances to do their own thing, play with their own friends without their sibling, and to have their space and property protected.

Be there for each child:

- Set aside "alone time" for each child, if possible. Each parent should try to spend some one-on-one with each kid on a regular basis. Try to get in at least a few minutes each day. It's amazing how much even 10 minutes of uninterrupted one-on-one time can mean to your child.
- When you are alone with each child, you may want to ask them once in a while what are some of the positive things their brother or sister does that they really like and what are some of the things they do that might bother them or make them mad. This will help you keep tabs on their relationships, and also remind you that they probably *do* have some positive feelings for each other!
- Listen — *really listen* — to how your children feel about what's going on in the family. They may not be so demanding if they know you at least care how they feel.
- Celebrate your children's differences.
- Let each child know they are special in their own way.

Resolving conflicts:

- Research shows that you should pay attention to your kids' conflicts (so that no one gets hurt, and you can notice abuse if it occurs). Try to see if your children can work out their own conflicts, but remember that younger children will probably need you to intervene

and help structure the problem-solving. Try not to take sides and favor one child over the other. Get them settled and calm first, then ask questions about what happened before dispensing discipline.

- Help your kids develop the skills to work out their conflicts on their own. Teach them how to compromise, respect one another, divide things fairly, etc. If you give them the tools, eventually they will have the confidence that they can work it out themselves.
- Don't yell or lecture. It won't help.
- It doesn't matter "who started it," because it takes two to make a quarrel. Hold children equally responsible when ground rules get broken.
- In a conflict, give your kids a chance to express their feelings about each other. Don't try to talk them out of their feelings. Help your kids find words for their feelings. Show them how to talk about their feelings, without yelling, name-calling, or violence.
- Encourage win-win negotiations, where each side gains something.
- Give your kids reminders and advance warnings (for example, counting to three). When they start picking on each other, help them remember to state their feelings to each other. Help them solve the problem themselves. You can offer suggestions, but let them decide what are the best options.
- If you are constantly angry at your kids, no wonder they are angry at each other! Anger feeds on itself. *Learn to manage your anger*, so you can teach your children how to manage *theirs*.
- Teach conflict resolution skills during calm times.
- Model good conflict resolution skills for your kids when interacting with them and with other family members.

When to intervene?

- Dangerous fights need to be stopped immediately. Separate the children. When they have calmed down, talk about what happened and make it very clear that no violence is ever allowed.
- If your children are physically violent with each other on a regular basis, and/or one child is always the victim, is frightened of the brother/sister, and doesn't fight back, you are dealing with sibling abuse. You should seek immediate professional help and guidance.

Involve your children in setting ground rules. Ground rules, with clear and consistent consequences for breaking them, can help prevent many squabbles.

Here are a few ideas:

- In a conflict, no hurting (hitting, kicking, pinching, etc.) is ever allowed.
- No name-calling, yelling, or tattling is allowed.
- If the kids fight over a toy, the toy goes into time-out.
- Any child who demands to be first, will go last.
- No making fun of a child who is being punished, or you will also be punished.
- No fighting in the car, or you will pull over and stop until all is calm again.
- If arguing over who gets first choice of bedtime stories or favorite seats in the car is a problem, assign your kids certain days of the week to be the one to make these choices
- If borrowing is a problem, have the child who borrows something from a brother or sister put up collateral—a possession that will be returned only when the borrowed item is returned.

What are family meetings, and how can they help with sibling rivalry?

If you have older children, call a family meeting every once in a while. A family meeting is a meeting for all family members to work together to make family decisions. Parents, children,

and any others who live in the home and have a stake in decisions affecting the daily life of the family should take part. Choose a time that works for everyone. Establish a set of rules (for example, no yelling or name-calling, everyone gets a turn) and allow everyone to have a say, even if members don't agree.

The purpose of the family meeting is to recognize that everyone's opinion makes a difference. The meeting allows the family to share their opinions, seek understanding, and find resolutions to problems. Family meetings help to build cooperation and responsibility, and make anger and rebellion less likely. Also, it is a time to share love, develop unity, and to build trust and self-esteem. The social skills and attitudes that children develop within the family circle are the skills and attitudes they will carry with them the rest of their lives

Sample Agenda for Family Meetings:

- Discuss family issues, concerns, interests, and positive events of past week.
- Determine priority issue(s).
- Clarify the issue to be discussed.
- Generate possible solutions.
- Determine the most effective solutions.
- Make plans to implement the solution.
- Plan one fun activity for the coming week.

Ground Rules for Family Meetings:

- Everyone gets a chance to talk.
- One person talks at a time and does not get interrupted.
- Okay to say what you feel.
- No one *has* to talk.
- Everyone has to listen.
- No one puts anyone else down.

Find out more about family meetings, including tips for what to discuss, where to hold them, setting an agenda, problem solving, and other important details.

What are some good books for parents on sibling rivalry?

- Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- Beyond Sibling Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Become Cooperative, Caring and Compassionate, by Peter Goldenthal

Another book that may be helpful is:

- 101 Activities for Siblings Who Squabble: Projects and Games to Entertain and Keep the Peace, by Linda Williams Aber