

Managing sibling rivalry: Help your children learn to live together

Sibling rivalry is the natural jealousy that children feel as they compete for their parents' time, attention, love and approval. Children can learn many positive character traits as they interact with their brothers and sisters—including sharing, cooperation, expressing their ideas, and leadership skills. They can learn how to manage conflict and how to refuse to participate in undesirable behaviors. Regrettably, children can also learn negative traits such as bullying and aggression, so it is important for you to set the tone and the rules for the family. Here are some important thoughts and recommendations on the matter:

All children experience sibling rivalry. The child who is closely attached to his (her) parents often feels the most “displaced” with the arrival of a new baby in the home. The amount of distress a child experiences after the birth of a new sibling does not predict the quality of their later relationship, however.

Examine your own family background and relationships with your siblings. A bad experience in your childhood can affect how you treat your children. If you find yourself always labeling one child as “the trouble maker,” for example, ask yourself if anything in your family history sheds light on this tendency.

Don't intervene in insignificant squabbles. Let your children work out their differences by themselves as much as possible. If the argument escalates, try identifying the emotions involved to help the children empathize with each other: “I see two children who both want to play with the same toy. That must be difficult.” This approach may be enough to help your children resolve their differences.

If an argument escalates to physical fighting or name calling, intervene immediately. Children need to know that you are there to protect them. “In our home we do not hit or call names” is a powerful statement.

Prevent disagreements by anticipation and planning. Give children different chores to do. Set up a time arrangement for using special toys.

Reward positive interactions. Give stickers, pennies, or other small rewards when you see your children behaving positively—sharing, cooperating, problem solving.

Plan family activities that everyone enjoys. Take turns allowing each child to decide the activity.

Do not compare your children with each other—favorably or unfavorably. It is not helpful for either child to hear “You cleaned up much better than your sister.”

Do not try to treat your children equally. This only encourages them to make constant comparisons among themselves. Instead, let your children know that you will meet their needs. If one child complains that the other received a new pair of shoes, explain, “I will buy you a new pair of shoes when you need them. But right now, your shoes still fit you.”

Most important, **keep your marriage (or your relationship with your partner) strong.** Research has shown that children experience less sibling rivalry when they see their parents behaving in a loving, caring manner. Be a good role model in working through differences.

For additional information, see *Siblings Without Rivalry* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (HarperCollins, 1998). This excellent resource for families—easy reading with lots of cartoons—will help you enjoy your children more.

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