

Family Focus

QUARRELING KIDS - HELPING YOUR CHILDREN GET ALONG

Is quarrelling normal?

All parents hope their children will get along and be friends. However, conflict between siblings is a normal part of family life. Although quarrelling between brothers and sisters might be inevitable, parents can help their children learn to co-operate with and respect their siblings.

Why do siblings fight?

Like adults, children can be competitive and disagree. Although most siblings quarrel, there are some factors that affect the frequency and severity of their conflict:

- **Age differences:** When children are young, they usually fight over toys or what to watch on TV. If there is a large difference in their age, there may be tension around space or privacy; or simply over who is getting more attention.
- **Personality differences:** Some children's personality traits may cause friction. For example, one sibling may be easily bored and need external stimulation, while the other is easily entertained and likes solitary activities. One child may have learning difficulties and feel frustrated with a sibling who is fast learner and enjoys educational activities.
- **Learned behaviour:** Children exposed to violent TV shows and movies are more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviour. And, since kids model their parents' behaviour, marital conflict or tension may increase fighting among siblings.

How should parents react to children's squabbles?

- Try to ignore them, unless one of the children is being physically or emotionally harmed.
- Allow your children, as much as possible, to resolve conflicts on their own. This will help them learn about solving their own arguments, compromising and communicating.

When should you get involved?

- When one child is about to be or is being physically or emotionally harmed.
- If one child is manipulating a younger sibling or is unmercifully teasing or bullying the other.

How to step in:

Arguments:

- **Take time to listen** to determine what they are arguing about.
- **Don't take sides**, try to figure out who started the argument, or become a referee.
- Validate their feelings. Tell them that you realize they're angry or that you know their brother irritates them, etc.
- **Acknowledge that they have a difficult problem to solve**, but that you think they are capable of finding a solution.
- **Remind them of the family rules** (e.g., no fighting, hitting, etc.) and that they need to be considerate of each other's feelings.

- **Try to re-state what each child wants/needs** if necessary and then ask what a fair solution might be.
- **Separate the children** until they can calmly find a solution if tempers begin to flare.

Fighting (physical conflict):

- Ask if it is a real fight or a play fight.
- Separate the two children so they can calm down.
- Remind them of the rules - no fighting, wrestling... etc.
- Once both children are calm, ask them to get together and discuss the reason for their fight. Brainstorm possible solutions and choose one you can all agree to.

Set some ground rules:

Like society, families run more smoothly when everyone follows some basic rules. However, to work effectively, it's best to have everyone (children and parents) involved in setting rules they can all live by. Family rules might include:

- Being respectful to others.
- Absolutely no hitting or hurting.
- No manipulation.
- Always asking to use something that isn't theirs.

Helping your children learn to communicate with one another:

Although your children may know how to get along with their peers, they may need a little help dealing with older or younger siblings. Learning to be positive and respectful with their brothers or sisters will help children as well as adults, when they encounter different personalities and age groups. Here are some tips to pass on to your children that will encourage them to communicate better with one another:

- **Listen to your brother or sister's point of view** and try to understand.
- **Always be respectful.** Don't blame, criticize or accuse.
- **Try to use a calm voice**, don't yell.
- **Be honest.** If you know you've made a mistake, say so and apologize.
- **Know that there isn't always a right or wrong.** Sometimes siblings will have different opinions - and that is OK.
- **Find better ways of asking for favours.** Instead of sulking, threatening, or manipulating, try techniques such as bargaining, swapping, etc.
- **Do your best to remember the good things about having a brother or sister**, such as shared: good times, laughter, friendship, games, secrets and memories.

Setting the tone for co-operation and harmony:

Having a set of family rules is a first step, but these should only be a more formalized version of the family's values. These principles or values should help create an atmosphere of co-operation. Here are some tips that will nurture a positive environment for your family:

- Be consistent.
- Try to find things that your children can work together on or help each other with - such as team chores - to promote cooperation instead of competition.
- Help them develop conflict management skills - give them suggestions such as using a timer to determine when one's turn is up, etc.
- Teach them how to brainstorm solutions.
- Show them what they *can* do, rather than what they *shouldn't* do.
- Have family meetings to discuss persistent problems and find joint solutions.

Leading by example

Research confirms what we all know is true - sibling conflict is less likely to occur in a family environment where:

- Family values prohibit physical aggression.
- Families participate in fun activities together on a regular basis.
- Parents demonstrate how to resolve disputes in respectful, non-aggressive ways.

Children copy behaviour from a very early age, right up to their early adult years. By modeling compassion, understanding and problem-solving skills, parents can show their children that this type of behaviour is valuable. After all, family life - interacting with brothers, sisters and parents - is where children learn and practice the social skills they'll need to be successful in life. Finding ways to work out conflicts with siblings will help children learn about co-operation, tolerance and kindness.

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