

MANAGING SIBLING RIVALRY

Red Ladder Optimized Learning Staff

Copyright 2013 Red Ladder Optimized Learning

When sibling rivalry is a problem, the kids may be fighting for any number of reasons. Maybe it's a difference in age: a three year old and a six year old may have little in common, as might a ten and thirteen year old. An older child might feel burdened by responsibility, while the younger one feels like he's always trying to catch up to his brother. And as anyone with more than one child knows, kids are born with different temperaments— from very energetic to less active, easy, persistent, more difficult, slow-to-warm — and temperaments sometimes clash, as do the genders. Sometimes it seems to kids as if they have absolutely nothing in common. We get to choose our friends, but not our brothers and sisters.

But when a boy hates his sister because dad seems gentler with her when they play, or when a girl resents the fact that she doesn't get to go on the guys' fishing trip with her dad and brother, it might not actually have much to do with the gentleness or the fishing. Sibling rivalry most always boils down to kids wanting more of their parents, and not particularly wanting to share their parents with a brother or sister. The sooner parents understand this, the sooner they can start to get a handle on destructive rivalry.

Rivalries Pro and Con

Parents often worry too much about tension between or among siblings. The first thing to ask is whether the tension really amounts to a problem. After all, rivalry can be a good thing. Sports teams play best against their rivals. Even players on the same team push themselves harder to measure up to teammates. A bit of healthy competition between

siblings can be motivating: kids can push one another to excel, or stand as positive examples for one another. This said, teamwork and cooperation should trump competition among sibs, and when sibs seem to want more than anything else to show the other up or when the competition becomes destructive, there may be a problem.

It's a mistake for parents to dismiss or suppress their children's negative feelings toward one another. After all, like joy and appreciation, anger is a normal feeling, and it's natural for brothers and sisters to get furious with one another from time to time. When siblings fight, parents can let them know that everyone— parents included— get mad sometimes, and that the important thing is to control the feelings so that the anger doesn't become destructive. Parents can sit down with kids, acknowledge the child's angry feelings, and teach the difference between feelings and actions. For example, "I know you're mad at



Sydney for scribbling on your picture, but it's not okay to throw your truck at her."

When possible, let brothers and sisters solve their own problems. Jumping in every time voices are raised may prevent kids from learning to manage themselves. Obviously though, when there's a clear mismatch in age, strength, or verbal ability, it might make sense to mediate sooner rather than later.

Addressing Problems

Families differ, but in every home there comes a point when the conflict is too intense, when things turn violent, or too verbally aggressive, or when the sheer number of altercations is too much to ignore. At some point, kids cross a line beyond which scrapping becomes the centre of things, and where it seems as though the children are more intent upon beating each other than accomplishing anything.

Continual competition among people who are supposed to love and support one another is potentially dangerous and can lead to grudges that endure into adulthood.

Favourites and Fairness

- Don't play favourites. Parents inevitably feel differently toward each of their children, but it's important for parents not to let differences of temperament unduly

influence their parenting. Remember, a lot of the conflict between or among siblings has to do with competition for the love and attention of parents. Recognizing this gives parents a leg up in managing sibling rivalry.

- Don't compare the kids. Each of your children is unique, has different abilities, talents, and challenges. It's rarely helpful to evaluate one against the other. Better to give each child his or her own goals and to develop expectations just for him or her. This is most obvious in families where one



child is handicapped and requires a lot of extra help, when one child is gifted, or when parents expect a set of twins to be the same.

- It's impossible to be entirely fair all of the time, and obsessive fairness isn't even a worthwhile aim. For example, hugs don't mean much if a parent is worrying about giving an equal number of them to each child. If it's one child's birthday, shouldn't she be the one who gets a party and some



presents that day? If one child has his tonsils out, surely he should receive some special attention. Just as certainly, his brother or sister will perceive the situation as unfair, and needs chances to learn how to deal with this. It may not seem fair to the child who has to go to bed earlier, but fairness isn't the issue if that child is younger and simply needs more sleep.

- Institute a system for distributing privileges and chores. For young children, make a system for deciding who gets to push buttons on the elevator or who gets to choose the video. For older children, who gets to ride in the passenger seat or who gets to choose the restaurant for lunch may be most important. Similarly, make chores systematic. Why turn doing the dishes, walking the dog or taking out the recycling into an opportunity for reasonable charges of favouritism?

Encourage the Positive

- Model effective conflict resolution. When parents fight, they should fight fairly. Kids imitate what they see in their parents.
- Encourage team-building among siblings. Encourage them to stick up for one another at home and away from home. Set them up as teammates in family games instead of opponents.
- Teach children how to deal with their sibling's antagonism. Ignoring teasing or kidding back, asking the brother or sister to stop what they're doing, or asking for help from an adult if necessary can all be part of the repertoire. Teach kids that they are responsible for how they respond to others' actions.
- Encourage kids when they do get along well. Children will likely show more of the behaviours their parents praise or

otherwise reward. In fact, if parents get involved only when their kids aren't getting along, they may inadvertently reinforce the conflict. (Remember, sibling rivalry generally has a lot to do with seeking parental attention.) So, parents might offer a reward to children when they pass an hour or a whole afternoon without fighting. If the reward for good behaviour gives kids more of your attention— reading an extra story, playing catch together or going skating— so much the better.

Confront Inappropriate Aggression

- Parents should take stock of their own ways of dealing with conflict. Model fair fighting. If parents fight with one another by taking cheap shots, screaming at one another, or if one or both parents are intimidating or violent toward the other, the kids may resort to cheap shots, screaming, or violence as a means of taking control.
- Resist taking sides when kids do fight. When parents only punish the child they see hitting the other, they may be missing a world of taunting and provocation from the other child.
- Introduce a family-wide plan for managing conflict. For example, make your home a "No Hitting" or "No Name-Calling" zone. When there's too much fighting or shouting, give everyone a time-out or have everyone write sentences.

Sometimes outside help is valuable. Parents who themselves grew up with family problems, or whose own sibling relationships were rocky (and maybe still are), or who can't agree on strategies for parenting and find themselves stuck, or who would just like family life to run a bit more smoothly, may find some time with a family therapist helpful. □

