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SIBLING RIVALRY

From KidsHealth From Nemours

About Sibling Rivalry

While many kids are lucky enough to become the best of friends with their siblings, it's common for brothers and sisters to fight. (It's also common for them to swing back and forth between adoring and detesting one other!)

Often, sibling rivalry starts even before the second child is born, and continues as the kids grow and compete for everything from toys to attention. As kids reach different stages of development, their evolving needs can significantly affect how they relate to one another.
It can be frustrating and upsetting to watch — and hear — your kids fight with one another. A household that's full of conflict is stressful for everyone. Yet often it's hard to know how to stop the fighting, and or even whether you should get involved at all. But you can take steps to promote peace in your household and help your kids get along.

Why Kids Fight

Many different things can cause siblings to fight. Most brothers and sisters experience some degree of jealousy or competition, and this can flare into squabbles and bickering. But other factors also might influence how often kids fight and how severe the fighting gets. These include:

- **Evolving needs.** It's natural for kids' changing needs, anxieties, and identities to affect how they relate to one another. For example, toddlers are naturally protective of their toys and belongings, and are learning to assert their will, which they'll do at every

turn. So if a baby brother or sister picks up the toddler's toy, the older child may react aggressively. School-age kids often have a strong concept of fairness and equality, so might not understand why siblings of other ages are treated differently or feel like one child gets preferential treatment. Teenagers, on the other hand, are developing a sense of individuality and independence, and might resent helping with household responsibilities, taking care of younger siblings, or even having to spend time together. All of these differences can influence the way kids fight with one another.

- **Individual temperaments.** Your kids' individual temperaments — including mood, disposition, and adaptability — and their unique personalities play a large role in how well they get along. For example, if one child is laid back and another is easily rattled, they may often get into it. Similarly, a child who is especially clingy and drawn to parents for comfort and love might be resented by siblings who see this and want the same amount of attention.
- **Special needs/sick kids.** Sometimes, a child's special needs due to illness or learning/emotional issues may require more parental time. Other kids may pick up on this disparity and act out to get attention or out of fear of what's happening to the other child.

Role models. The way that parents resolve problems and disagreements sets a strong example for kids. So if you and your spouse work through conflicts in a way that's respectful, productive, and not aggressive, you increase the chances that your children will adopt those tactics when they run into problems with one another. If your kids see you routinely shout, slam doors, and loudly argue when you have problems, they're likely to pick up those bad habits themselves.

What to Do When the Fighting Starts

While it may be common for brothers and sisters to fight, it's certainly not pleasant for anyone in the house. And a family can only tolerate a certain amount of conflict. So what should you do when the fighting starts?

Whenever possible, **don't get involved.** Step in only if there's a danger of physical harm. If you always intervene, you risk creating other problems. The kids may start expecting your help and wait for you to come to the rescue rather than learning to work out the

problems on their own. There's also the risk that you — inadvertently — make it appear to one child that another is always being "protected," which could foster even more resentment. By the same token, rescued kids may feel that they can get away with more because they're always being "saved" by a parent.
If you're concerned by the language used or name-calling, it's appropriate to "coach" kids through what they're feeling by using appropriate words. This is different from intervening or stepping in and separating the kids.

Even then, encourage them to resolve the crisis themselves. If you do step in, try to resolve problems **with** your kids, not for them.
When getting involved, here are some steps to consider:

- Separate kids until they're calm. Sometimes it's best just to give them space for a little while and not immediately rehash the conflict. Otherwise, the fight can escalate again. If you want to make this a learning experience, wait until the emotions have died down.
- Don't put too much focus on figuring out which child is to blame. It takes two to fight — anyone who is involved is partly responsible.
- Next, try to set up a "win-win" situation so that each child gains something. When they both want the same toy, perhaps there's a game they could play together instead.

Remember, as kids cope with disputes, they also learn important skills that will serve them for life — like how to value another person's perspective, how to compromise and negotiate, and how to control aggressive impulses.

Helping Kids Get Along

Simple things you can do every day to prevent fighting include:

- Set ground rules for acceptable behavior. Tell the kids to keep their hands to themselves and that there's no cursing, no name-calling, no yelling, no door slamming. Solicit their input on the rules — as well as the consequences when they break them. This teaches kids that they're responsible for their own actions, regardless of the situation or how provoked they felt, and discourages any attempts to negotiate regarding who was "right" or "wrong."

- Don't let kids make you think that everything always has to be "fair" and "equal" — sometimes one kid needs more than the other.
- Be proactive in giving your kids one-on-one attention directed to their interests and needs. For example, if one likes to go outdoors, take a walk or go to the park. If another child likes to sit and read, make time for that too.
- Make sure kids have their own space and time to do their own thing — to play with toys by themselves, to play with friends without a sibling tagging along, or to enjoy activities without having to share 50-50.
- Show and tell your kids that, for you, love is not something that comes with limits.
- Let them know that they are safe, important, and loved, and that their needs will be met.
- Have fun together as a family. Whether you're watching a movie, throwing a ball, or playing a board game, you're establishing a peaceful way for your kids to spend time together and relate to each other. This can help ease tensions between them and also keeps you involved. Since parental attention is something many kids fight over, fun family activities can help reduce conflict.
- If your children frequently squabble over the same things (such as video games or dibs on the TV remote), post a schedule showing which child "owns" that item at what times during the week. (But if they keep fighting about it, take the "prize" away altogether.)
- If fights between your school-age kids are frequent, hold weekly family meetings in which you repeat the rules about fighting and review past successes in reducing conflicts. Consider establishing a program where the kids earn points toward a fun family-oriented activity when they work together to stop battling.
- Recognize when kids just need time apart from each other and the family dynamics. Try arranging separate play dates or activities for each kid occasionally. And when one child is on a play date, you can spend one-on-one time with another.

Keep in mind that sometimes kids fight to get a parent's attention. In that case, consider taking a time-out of your own. When you leave, the incentive for fighting is gone. Also, when your own fuse is getting short, consider handing the reins over to the other parent, whose patience may be greater at that moment.

Getting Professional Help

In a small percentage of families, the conflict between brothers and

sisters is so severe that it disrupts daily functioning, or particularly affects kids emotionally or psychologically. In those cases, it's wise to get help from a mental health professional. Seek help for sibling conflict if it:

- is so severe that it's leading to marital problems
- creates a real danger of physical harm to any family member
- is damaging to the self-esteem or psychological well-being of any family member
- may be related to other significant concerns, such as depression

If you have questions about your kids' fighting, talk with your doctor, who can help you determine whether your family might benefit from professional help and refer you to local behavioral health resources.

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