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# Sibling Relationships

Jennie and Kyle are playing in the next room with their new board game. You sit down with a newspaper to enjoy a few minutes of quiet. Suddenly, their voices get louder. “Those are the rules! You have to go back to start,” shouts Jennie. “NO!” answers Kyle. As you peek around the corner, Kyle grabs his game piece and hides it behind his back. Jennie reaches over and pulls on his arm. When Kyle sees you, he begins to cry. Jennie sits back, fuming. “Those are the rules,” she mutters.



Sibling rivalry can be as stressful for parents as it is for children. All parents want their children to be good friends; after all, brother and sister relationships last a lifetime. Parents wonder, “Will they ever outgrow this fighting?”

It may help to know that sibling rivalry is natural. Siblings must share space, time, toys, and especially, parents. Children aren’t born with the ability to get along. Sharing and working out differences are skills they must learn. And it will take many years for them to learn to share and cooperate. You are their most important teacher. Teaching these skills is a tough job. How would you respond to Kyle and Jennie?

## Stepping in

Should you step in and order a stop to the game? Should you send Kyle and Jennie to separate rooms? Stepping in may be necessary sometimes, but it can also confuse the matter.

When you step in, *you* decide how to solve the conflict. In the future, your children may call on you to be the judge. They may not even try to work out their disagreements or their own. Your attention also may become a prize in their battles. They may argue more, knowing that their raised voices will get your attention.

## Staying out

Should you ignore the arguing? Will the children work out their problem if they are left alone? In some cases this may work. However, most of the time, it’s hard for parents to turn their backs on yelling and name calling. You may worry that your children will hurt each other physically or with their harsh words.

It’s a difficult balance. On one hand, you don’t want your attention to encourage arguing. On the other hand, you do want to be there to help your children learn to get along. You can give your children skills to work out their problems by themselves, by teaching them conflict resolution.

## Conflict resolution

*Teach conflict resolution during a calm time.*

Don’t introduce the following ideas when you find your children arguing. Their emotions will get in the way of learning. A day later, you may use their argument as an example. Together you can discuss the concept of conflict resolution.

### *Set ground rules.*

Ask the children to help. What behavior isn't allowed during a conflict? Some important rules may include: no hurting (hitting, kicking or pinching), no name calling, no yelling and no tattling.

### *Set consequences for broken rules.*

Ask your children to help you come up with fair and logical consequences. What will happen if they break the rules? For example, they may lose the privilege of playing together for a few hours. Or they may have to put away the toy they are arguing over. These are logical consequences because they relate to what the children were doing when they broke the rules.

### *Talk to the children about their feelings.*

Talking about feelings without yelling or violence is a good way to handle conflict. Ask the children to think about how they felt when they were arguing over the game. You may need to help them put their feelings into words. You might say, "Jennie, it sounded like you were angry because you felt Kyle wasn't following the rules." "Kyle, it sounded like you were frustrated because you didn't want to lose the game." Encourage the children to express their feelings in words. For example, Jennie might say to Kyle, "I get angry when you don't follow the rules."

### *Encourage children to solve their problems by thinking of alternatives to fighting or yelling, and the consequences of these alternatives.*

For example, Jennie and Kyle might take a break from the game. Or, they might double check the rules or ask you to read the rules to them. If they decide to take a break, they may find something else to play with that they enjoy.

## **Follow through**

### *Stick to the ground rules you and the children have chosen.*

When you enforce the rules, such as no hitting or name calling, do so fairly. If you step into a conflict, don't just blame the child who appeared to be breaking the rule. Unless you saw the whole situation, it can be difficult to tell exactly what happened. *Hold children equally responsible.*

### *Give reminders.*

It will take time before your children remember to use the skills you talked about. Remind them. When they begin to pick on each other, restate their feelings. For example, say "Jennie, are you annoyed? If you are, tell Kyle." Or "Kyle do you feel picked on? Tell Jennie how you are feeling." Don't solve the problem for them, unless they have broken the ground rules. Remind them to think of what they might do to solve the problem. You might ask, "What can you do to solve the problem without hurting each other physically or emotionally?"

### *Praise your children when they use their new skills.*

"Good for you! You solved that problem yourselves!"

## **More tips**

The following tips may also help reduce conflicts among your children:

### *Don't compare children.*

Refrain from saying "See how quietly your sister is sitting, you should try to be like her." Or, "Your brother has good table manners. Why can't you eat like he does?"

### *Don't start competition.*

Don't say, "Let's see who can run faster." Or, "Who can clean up better?"

*Encourage respect.*

Praise your children when they are polite and considerate. “It was kind of you to help your sister put her toys away. She was very happy.”

*Show your children how you solve problems.*

If you express your feelings and solve problems by talking rather than yelling, your message will be that much stronger. Your children will learn from watching you and listening to you.

*Notice when conflicts occur - is there a pattern?*

Conflicts are often more common when children are tired, bored or have spent too much time together. Providing quiet time, or private spaces where children can safely be by themselves, may help prevent conflicts.

*You don't have to treat children the same to be fair.*

Children have different needs and different personalities. For example, it's fair to allow older children to stay up later. It's fair to give younger children some extra attention when they're tired. It's fair to give shy children extra encouragement to try something new.



*Celebrate differences.*

Often siblings will try different activities as a way to show their individuality. If you encourage children to build their special talents, they will have less need to compete.

*It's important to praise children for what they do.*

It's even more important to let them know they are special - just for who they are.

**Remember**

Sibling rivalry is inevitable. To help minimize its negative effects, parents should treat each child as a unique individual by meeting their needs as fairly and consistently as possible, and giving each child separately the attention he or she needs.

**Sources:**

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