

Minimizing Sibling Rivalry
Miriam Koenig, M.S., M.F.T.

If you ask parents with more than one child what bothers them the most, most would put sibling rivalry at the top of the list. The constant bickering, competition and need to make sure that everything is equal never seem to end. It is exhausting for parents. But there is good news: sibling rivalry can be managed and it is possible to decrease the amount of fighting between children.

The first cause of sibling rivalry is that siblings present a threat to a child. When a new baby comes into a family, the older child may feel displaced. He is no longer the only child and that makes him feel insecure. He suddenly has to share his parents, who are the source of everything for him both physically and psychologically. Also, the new baby is fragile and beautiful and gets all the attention. Depending on the age and temperament of the child, this is a tough adjustment and it is understandable that the child resents the new baby. These feelings rarely go away completely. They go underground and as the child gets older, they surface in more sophisticated ways. The younger child is also in a difficult position. She may find animosity being directed at her from the older child and respond with anger of her own. Or she may feel resentful of all the privileges that older children enjoy. It's not easy to watch someone always getting to do things you can't and never being the first to do something. You can see how these younger children can develop some overwhelming feelings.

Sometimes parents inadvertently exacerbate the feelings that are already there when they compare their children. Parents take a relationship that is already fraught with tension and then add comments such as, "Why can't you be more like your sister?" or "Your brother would never..." and the situation goes from bad to worse. No one likes to be compared and this can cause children to resent their siblings. Stop comparing your children, Believe it or not, they are already comparing themselves and that is a lot of pressure to be under all the time. They need to hear that you value them for their uniqueness and that you don't want them to be clones of their siblings. Kids need to hear that they are special and that you appreciate and understand that they have different strengths. Make a conscious effort to emphasize how each child is unique and valued and not to compare, and your kids will have a better relationship with each other.

Parents also trigger sibling jealousy when they label their children. Often, parents with more than one child will begin to label the children as the baby, the middle child, the smart one, the beautiful one, the athlete, the artist, the musician, my easy one, etc. Although these labels may be accurate, they can exacerbate sibling rivalry. If you always have to hear your parents gush about your brother the chess prodigy, you might assume that you are not so smart. The other drawback of labeling is that parents close the door for children to discover other aspects of themselves. We get piano lessons for the talented child and don't think that our other child might love to learn piano even if he's not as talented. This can foster resentment. Parents who lose the labels will see a decrease in sibling jealousy.

Of course, some sibling problems are exacerbated because parents inadvertently reward the behavior. Perhaps they repeatedly side with a particular child. Perhaps the children are bored and think that getting a rise out of Mom will provide some good entertainment. There are many ways that this behavior can be reinforced. Take inventory of what your reaction is to sibling fighting and how you may be contributing to it and change your behavior accordingly.

Stop trying to make everything fair. This seems counterintuitive, but it works. Many parents try hard to make everything fair for their kids. Not only is this impossible, it is undesirable. You can't succeed at this no matter how hard you try. Life isn't fair. Inevitably, Henry will be invited to more birthday parties than Emma, Jacob's teacher will give treats and Jessie's won't. It is understandable that our children want to feel that they are loved as much as their siblings. What you need to teach them is that measuring love by who gets what is a mistake. Explain to your children that in your family everyone is loved and everyone's needs will be met. If one person is hungry, he will be fed. That doesn't mean everyone else needs a sandwich. You will need to demonstrate over and over again that each child will have his or her needs met, not someone else's. But different people have different needs at different times.

Life is never going to be the same for your children. It won't hurt them to learn that now and you will find that once they are reassured that you will take care of them as individuals, the constant comparing of who has what will become less frequent. It will not disappear entirely because children are children and it is hard for them to watch a brother or sister come home from a party with lots of candy while they have none. But the whining such as "he has more butter on his toast than I do" should subside as they realize that you will take care of what they need.

When should parents intervene in fighting and how should they do so? First, it's important to understand that a certain amount of fighting is normal. Fighting where no one is getting hurt, either physically or emotionally, should usually be ignored. You don't want to get involved in every little disagreement. There is routine bickering in every household and children learn skills that will help them to get along in their peer groups. If your kids are not asking for your help, then stay out of it.

However, chronic bickering can become a problem for parents; when it does, it can be helpful to use positive reinforcement in such a way that children have to work together to earn a reward. For example, set up a chart and every day that they get along, put a sticker on the chart. When they've earned a certain number of stickers, they will get to have ice cream or a similar treat. Remember, they must work together on this.

You also have a right to some peace and quiet. You can tell your kids, "I see you want to argue. I don't want to listen to it so if you want to argue, you'll need to go where I can't hear you." That will also eliminate their audience – you.

Sometimes fighting between kids becomes heated or escalates. You might sense a danger of violence or your children may ask you to intervene. Describe what you are seeing and use reflective listening. Make sure you validate both points of view. Get your children started on constructive problem-solving. Give them a pencil and paper and ask them to let you know what they come up with. Let them do this by themselves. They can work in separate rooms if they are too angry to be near each other. They might need a cooling-off period before they can begin problem-solving.

It's important to set some basic limits. Hurting another person is not acceptable, with siblings or with anyone. If your child is so upset that he feels he might hurt someone, he should come to you. If he chooses not to do that and hits or kicks someone, a house rule has been broken and that must be dealt with before the conflict can be resolved. Humiliating a sibling is also unacceptable, particularly in front of other people. Sibling conflict needs to stay within the family and be resolved within the family.

