

Ways to Reduce Sibling Rivalry

Give undivided attention Try to spend some time alone with each child doing something that the child really enjoys. Ten minutes a day for a week can turn around a child's feelings of being left out or unimportant.

Encourage feelings of worth Praise children for what they are, not just for what they can do.

Avoid comparisons Resist the temptation to motivate your children by comparing them to each other or to other children. Such comparisons make children fear doing poorly in a contest and may lead to competitiveness. Above all, let your children know that you love them equally, though each in a different way.

Don't always insist on sharing Each child is entitled to certain possessions that should not have to be shared with anyone. If you clearly establish this right, you may be amazed at your child's willingness at times to voluntarily share previously fought-over possessions.

Don't expect your children to play together all the time They need some freedom from each other.

Allow the older child to have his or her own way at least half the time Sometimes in our efforts to protect the younger children, we overbalance the scales.

Remember also that the younger, smaller, and seemingly less powerful sibling may sometimes be the instigator or manipulator of the conflict.

Don't focus on the misbehavior If one child is hurting another, pay attention to the "victim" and try to soothe the child. It's a common mistake to focus on the "villain" first to stop the hitting, biting, or hair pulling. But that merely teaches a child how to get your attention first.

Emphasize family unity and permanence If your children say nasty things about one another to you, point out that no matter how unpleasant their behavior may be, the sister or brother is still and will always be "one of us." When we remind our children that they will always belong to us and to each other, we strengthen their sense of safety. This inner security enhances their capacity for brotherly and sisterly love.

Consult your children A child can often contribute valuable insights on what a sibling is struggling with, thinking about, or trying to express. If you ask one child to help you understand another, let the child know you will seriously reflect on the insights shared.

by Ronald Pitzer / U of M sociologist

Recommended books about sibling relationships

Books for parents:

Siblings Without Rivalry by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

The Sibling Bond by S. Bank and M. Kahn

Sibling Connections by L. Markowitz

Loving Each One Best: A Caring and Practical Approach to Raising Siblings by Nancy Samalin

Birth Order Blues: How Parents Can Help Their Children Meet the Challenges of Birth Order by Meri Wallace

Books for children about siblings:

I Love My Baby Sister (Most of the Time) by Martha Alexander

Big Brother by Charlotte Solotow

Walk Home Tired, Billy Jenkins by Ianthe Thomas

Parenting Skills from Siblings Without Rivalry book
(authors Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish)

1. Resist the urge to compare

Instead of comparing one child unfavorably to another (“Why can’t you hang up your clothes like your brother?”) speak to the child only about the behavior that displeases you.

Describe what you see

Describe how you feel

Describe what needs to be done

2. Children with problems do not need to be viewed as problem children.

What they do need is:

Acceptance of their frustration

Appreciation for what they have accomplished

Help in focusing on solutions

3. Let no one lock a child into a role

Not his parents (Why are you always so mean?)

Not the child himself (If the child says “I know I’m mean.” Say “You’re also capable of being kind”)

Not his brothers or sisters (If sister says “Johnny’s being mean.” Say “Try asking him differently. You may be surprised at how generous he can be.”)

If a sibling attacks a sibling, attend to the child that’s hurt without attacking the perpetrator.

4. When the children can’t work out a problem by themselves

Call a meeting and explain purpose and ground rules

Write down each child’s feelings/concerns and read aloud

Allow time for rebuttal

Invite everyone to come up with solutions. Write down all ideas without evaluating.

Decide upon the solution you can all live with.

Follow-up

5. How to give support to the child who asks for it without taking sides

State each child’s case

State the value or rule

Leave the doorway open for the possibility of negotiation

Leave

Ask Yourself . . .

Is it normal bickering?

If yes, stay out of the squabble.

- Ignore it. Act as if the quarreling doesn't exist. One way to do this is to focus on pleasant thoughts. Think about a favorite place.
- Remind yourself that your children are learning to solve problems and that's good.

Is the argument heating up?

If yes, your children may need your help.

- Recognize your children's feelings. "You two sound angry with each other!"
- Speak about each child's point of view. "I see Jenny, you want to play with the red car, because you had it first. And, Mark you want to play with the red car too."
- Let your children know the difficulty of the problem. "That's a tough one—two children and only one red car."
- Have confidence in your children. Tell them, "I know you two can work out a solution to your problem."
- Leave the room.

You Can Also . . .

- Offer choices. Decide what your children can do instead of what they are doing. "You can play pleasantly together or play in your room." Be sure to offer choices that you as a parent will accept.
- Direct your children's behavior. Tell your children specifically what you want them to do in place of what they are doing. Situations where this works well is:
 - when children have few social skills.
 - when you as a parent are too tired to offer choices or help children problem solve.
 - when children are too tired to make reasonable decisions.
 - when children need "how to" information.

Is the situation becoming more dangerous—turning into a physical or verbal fight?

If yes, you need to step in.

- Tell your children what you see or hear. "I see two children who are angry and calling each other names."
- Separate your children. "You each need a time to cool off. Jenny, you go to your room and Mark, to your room."