

Sibling Rivalry Among Preschool Children

Most parents have a picture of loving children playing happily together, not name calling, pinching, punching, hitting, tattling or shrieking for Mom or Dad! Unfortunately this kind of behaviour is a normal part of family life too.



Where it Starts

Sibling rivalry is less about the relationship between your children and more about their relationship with you. Each of them wants you to love them. You set the stage by being fair, respectful, and demonstrating your unwavering love.

At the beginning, parents can do a lot to influence siblings' feelings about each other. Another BC HealthFile in this series, [#92f Bringing Home the Second Baby](#), has helpful information about this period in family life.

Setting the Stage for Peace

Expectations

Your children are in the process of learning how to be social beings. Sharing and manners do not come naturally. They have to be learned and they will be doing most of their learning and experimenting on each other. Children develop so fast during the first couple of years. The four year old may be willing to share and take turns, but the two year old is not able to share or understand the concept of sharing. He just knows he wants the truck and he wants it now! This, of course, will put an immediate end to any sharing and turn-taking that the four year old had been willing to do.

No Comparisons

Keeping in mind that competition for your attention is at the root of a lot of sibling rivalry, avoid using language to compare children. The most obvious of

course, are comments like "Why can't you sit nicely and quietly like your brother?" Less obvious are comparisons that are designed to make a child feel better about himself. For example, "Wow, you sure did a great job on this picture. I know your brother could never draw this well." These kinds of comments are meant well, but they reinforce the sense that you, as the parent, are measuring your children against each other.

Value Their Differences

Encourage children to pursue their different interests and honour their right to have their own friends. Teach them to respect each other's privacy.

Give Up Labels

Think for a minute about labels like: the big boy, the baby, the neat one, etc. Labels define us and too often they are self-fulfilling.

Fair Doesn't Mean Equal

Parents don't have to treat each child the same. They need to be fair. Show your children that they will get what they need when they need it. This discourages comparisons. Start early by asking the kids to show you how much cereal they each think they can eat. Encourage the meeting of needs rather than the idea that everything has to be equal.

Time Alone

Children need time alone with their parents. Make sure this happens each day, if possible.

Children sometimes need your complete attention, RIGHT NOW! When this happens, remember that nothing else is as important as they are. Very often, a short little one-on-one talk is all they need to set their world right again.

The daily transition between daycare and home can be a stressful time for kids. Ignore dinner preparations for a little while and take your children one at a time for five minutes, onto your lap and share a cuddle, or talk about the day.

The Timing

If your children are fighting a lot, take a look at when it's happening. Is there a pattern? After charting their fighting for a week, Sheila discovered that her kids were at their worst each day from 4:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. She discovered that giving the kids a wholesome snack each day at 4:00 p.m. worked wonders.

Encourage Sibling Affection

Get the kids involved in doing nice things for each other. Don't force the issue, but if you involve them in things that you're doing too, they'll be more likely to participate.

Make Clear Rules

Be very clear about what behaviour is and is not acceptable in your home. For example saying "please" and "thank you," and playing quietly while sister naps are expected. Not acceptable, however, are name-calling, tattling, hitting, pushing, punching, kicking, etc.

Dealing With Fighting

Acknowledge Feelings

Children often feel angry because of the differences in their development. 'Big' kids feel frustrated when they are continually asked to make allowances for their younger siblings.

Younger siblings have their own problems. Their older siblings are bigger, punch harder, won't let the younger one do things herself and have the verbal skills to be first-class name callers and tattlers.

As a parent, you can acknowledge their emotions and teach them to vent those emotions in non-harmful ways. Accept how they feel and don't try to persuade them otherwise. By listening respectfully to them, you are teaching that these emotions can be talked out, rather than acted out.

Discourage tattle tales. Have any 'disciplinary talks' you need to have with one sibling in private.

Evaluate How Serious It Is

Most of the time, children's real objective in fighting is to draw you, the parent, into their world. They want YOU to step in and say they're right.

The best way to deal with children fighting is to ignore them. But to do that, you first need to make sure that no one is likely to get hurt. Evaluate how serious it is:

- **Squabbling** - This is the normal, ongoing back-and-forth chatter that siblings do. Ignore it.

- **Serious Arguing** - At this stage they are very angry and might need your help. Acknowledge their anger with each other. At an older age, you will be able to express confidence in their ability to find a solution, then walk out of the room, but at a younger age you will need to help them come up with a solution.

- **Dangerous Fighting** - When children are in danger of actually hurting each other, a parent does need to separate them. In these cases, a cooling-off period, with each child in a separate room, is the best idea.

Conflict Resolution

Teach them good conflict resolution skills at a young age and they'll know how to do this themselves in a few years.

This BC HealthFile has presented some ideas to help you with the challenge of parenting. There are other topics in the child development series that you may also find helpful. The BC HealthFiles link and this series can be found on the BC HealthGuide Web site at:

www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm



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