Sibling rivalry

Many things annoy parents (feel free to make your own list) but sibling rivalry has been voted the number one most aggravating feature of family life.

Kids seem to be able to fight over anything - who gets the front seat, who gets to go through a door first, who picks the DVD to watch, even who gets to hold the case of the DVD while they are watching it. They will find an old crusty stuffed toy in the basement that no one has played with for five years and suddenly they are fighting over it like it was the last parachute on a plunging plane.

Sibling rivalry is particularly acute between ‘steps’ in blended families and is often cited as the major pressure on new relationships - marriages literally get pushed apart because of the stress of sibling rivalry.

Three insights into why siblings fight

If children believe they are not going to get their needs met, they are going to do something about it - nagging, whining, demanding behaviour etc. If they believe that their siblings are rivals for the things they want, then they will campaign against them. Of course you are not going to allow any of your children to be deprived, but their immature logic might have lead them to believe it is happening.

Second insight - even though they may seem to be fighting over toys or treats, what they could be fighting over is you! They want you to confirm that they are significant and they want you to intervene and prove your love for them by deciding the squabble in their favour. Evidence? You drop your kids off at a friend’s house for a while, and when you pick them up later, what does she say? “They were little angels”. “No they weren’t!” you want to protest. “They are little savages!” But your friend is right - they probably were lovable, compliant little darlings - because you were not there.

And the third insight - maybe they just don’t like each other, and maybe they never will. Nevertheless, they can still learn to get on with each other and, who knows, things may change in time.

No favourites

It is very natural to have preferences. You have a favourite fragrance, a favourite ice cream, a favourite car and, if you have more than one child, it is very likely that one of your children is more compliant and easier to like - your favourite. There are few things as toxic to a child’s heart, or more likely to fuel rivalry, than believing their parents favour one child over another. Let them know that just because you love another child very, very much, it in no way reduces the amount of love you have for them. You can love them differently, but you love no child more than any other. Parents cannot have favourites.

Cope before you conquer

Long before you conquer sibling rivalry (if you ever do), you can be coping with it. One of the best techniques is simply to separate them. If kids are irritating each other, maybe everyone will enjoy some time apart. Key to coping is having family rules in place that are real limits to aggressive, unpleasant behaviour.

Boundaries won't fix the underlying rivalry, but it does mean that they know that hitting, abuse or damaging property is absolutely forbidden, and it prevents the rivalry escalating. “We don’t speak like that in this home. Each of you cool off in your rooms for five minutes, and then I...”
want to hear how you can sort this out. “Hey! If you hit, you sit! Both of you, on the floor. Now! No, further apart so you can’t reach each other.”

**Special times with each child**

I do not know how much time a child actually needs from a parent, but a child will probably be content if they have the knowledge that they will be getting some special, one-on-one focussed attention from their parent in the foreseeable future. They won’t resent you taking time to pacify their baby brother if they have been assured that tonight you are going to read them a story. They will be satisfied with the idea that your time and attention has to be divided between other brothers and sisters (and work and chores and study and a dozen other things) if they know that their name is on the calendar for a ‘Mum-date’ or a ‘Dad-date’ - a fun time with just one child and a parent.

**You don’t have to intervene every time**

Remember, sometimes sibling rivalry happens because they know it does draw you in and gets your attention. We don’t have to jump to attention every time our kids snap their fingers. We do not have to be at their beck and call all the time, and our own boundaries and authority need to be respected.

If there is hitting, abuse, bullying going on then rush to intervene, but if they are managing to express their disagreement to each other in a way which is not too unpleasant or aggressive, then let it run for a while. You can even do some coaching. “Good to hear you trying to sort this out. Let your brother have his say and then you can have your turn.” Rather than sorting them out, establish the ground rules: “No hitting, no insults. Stick to the issue.”

**Fairness**

Life isn’t fair. Sometimes we have to tell them that - there might only be two puppies and there are three kids wanting to hold one - life isn’t fair. But that doesn’t let us off the hook. We should seek to be as fair as we can. A kitchen timer can be a wonderful independent referee for controlling turns on a game, trampoline or whatever. “When you hear the timer go off, it’s time to change turns.” Fairness doesn’t mean that things have to be absolutely equal - it would be very unfair if a 12 year old got exactly the same amount of food as his four-year-old brother. Fairness means they get enough. A classic solution to sharing cake: one of you cuts it and the other one chooses.

**Try this**

At The Parenting Place we believe ‘family is everything’ so we’ve created a series of 45 Hot Tips brochures to help you make the most of your parenting journey. They’re grouped into four categories - Early Years, Middle Years, Tweens and Teens, and General Parenting.

**Middle Years topics include** -

- 13 ways to teach values
- Bullying
- Helping a worrier
- Ideas for family fun
- I’m bored
- Making friends
- Manners do matter
- Sibling rivalry
- Teaching self-control
- The strong-willed child

One type of apparently peaceful disagreement may need your intervention - you may have a child who is very forceful with her words (I say ‘her’ because girls can be so much more skilful with their language.) Of course you would protect your children from physical aggression, but also take care they don’t get verbally bullied as well.

---

Brochures are available from theparentingplace.com or The Parenting Place, 300 Great South Road, Greenlane in Auckland, 0800 53 56 59. The Parenting Place is a not-for-profit organisation working to enhance the lives of families and young people in communities and schools throughout New Zealand. To help us create more resources, Vodafone customers text FAMILY to 7005 to give $5