

Sibling Rivalry and what to do about it

Growing up with two younger sisters our house was a constant war zone of yelling, name calling, tattling and teasing. It was always worse when dad wasn't home as we all feared the wrath of dad. Mom would just yell that we were going to send her to the nut house. It wasn't until I became a parent with sibling squabbles of my own before I understood the true frustration when your offspring are at each others throats. Cheer up.....there are lots of things parents can do to help their children get along better and work through conflicts in a positive way.

Sibling rivalry is the jealousy, competition and fighting between brothers and sisters. Disputes between siblings are normal as children grow and learn about relationships. In fact next to children's relationships with their parents relationships with their siblings teach them the most and will have influence on relationships in later life. Learning how to resolve disputes positively will build strong social and communication skills for life. Use sibling arguments as "teachable moments" to model appropriate conflict resolutions.

Some factors/triggers that can contribute to sibling rivalry;
Each child is competing to define who they are as an individual. As they discover who they are, they try to find their own talents, activities, and interests. They want to show that they are different from their sibling.

Children often feel that they are getting unequal amounts of your attention, discipline and responsiveness.

Children who are hungry, bored or tired are more likely to start a fight.

Children may not know positive ways to get attention from their brother or sister so they pick fights.

Children will fight more with each other in families where there is no understanding that fighting is not an acceptable way to resolve conflicts.

Families that don't share enjoyable time together will probably have more conflict.

Some sibling's conflicts are pure power plays trying to establish who is in charge.

How can you help your kids get along better? There are a few basics to always keep in mind:

- Never compare your children, they are not the same they are unique individuals that have their own talents, interests and skills. Celebrate that, no matter how different your children are from each other. Comparing children only sets them up to be more competitive with each other which in turn creates more fights.

- Don't play favorites, again this only increases the tension as well as resentment between them. It is our job as parents to love our children unconditionally.
- Set your kids up to cooperate rather than compete. This builds a sense of team work and camaraderie.
- Being fair is very important but it is not the same as being equal. Children need to learn that you will do your best to meet each of their unique needs.
- Plan family activities that are fun for everyone, if your kids have good experiences together it acts as a buffer when they come into conflict. It's easier to work it out with someone you share warm memories with.
- Make sure each child has enough time and space on their own. Kids need chances to do their own thing.
- Be careful how you respond to siblings fighting. How you respond role models to them how to respond to conflict.

Now that you have some of the basics how do you help to resolve conflict? Research shows that while you should pay attention to your kids conflicts (so you can make sure that no one is getting hurt), it is best not to intervene. When parents jump into sibling spats, they often protect one child over the other. This escalates the conflict. Rather than taking sides help your kids develop the skills to work out their conflicts on their own. Teach them how to compromise, respect one another, and divide things fairly and to use their words to work things out.

Give them the tools and then express your confidence that they can work it out on their own. Don't get drawn into it but stay close to monitor the situation. If your kids attempted or were successful in their attempts to find a solution ensure you give them positive feedback to help build their self esteem around problem solving, they will then be more likely to try it again. Dangerous fights need to be stopped immediately. Separate the children. When they have calmed down talk about what happened and make it clear that no violence is ever allowed.

As normal as sibling spats are it is truly heaven when every one is getting along.

Trina Kennedy is the Growing Together Coordinator at Family Services of Central Alberta, the Parent Link Centre. For more information, call 343-6400.