

Managing Siblings*

Liking Each Child as an Individual

- The desire for individual attention from you fuels a lot of sibling conflict, so make sure each has some special time with you when they are NOT fighting
- All children are loveable, but some are easier to like than others: find something genuinely likeable and unique about each of your children and let them know you like it
- There are no “black sheep” in a family, only horses and zebras (i.e., some children fit in better with the family norms than others, but their “feistiness” may be an asset in other environments)

Showing Empathy for the Child’s Predicament

- Resentful feelings towards a sibling are natural: put yourself in the child’s shoes and say what he or she might be feeling (e.g., “You feel hurt that I’m spending so much time with the baby”)
- Avoid criticizing or lecturing children about the inability to share or cooperate: it’s remarkable any of them do! Also, it’s negative attention which increases undesirable behaviors.
- Don’t assume that the older child should be more mature when it comes to sibling conflict: it hurts when your parents seem to favor your sibling, regardless of age
- Speak to children only about their own misbehaviours: avoid comparing their actions unfavorably with their siblings’ actions (that would make anyone angry!)

Encouraging Cooperation rather than Competition

- Praise or reward cooperation (e.g., plan an enjoyable family activity that you can do after everyone has worked together to clean up the house)
- Praise or reward improving on their personal best, rather than competing with their sibling (e.g., if one child does better at school, reward A’s vs. B’s for that one; B’s vs. C’s for the other)
- Model how to compromise (e.g., If you let me watch my favorite TV show now, I will let you choose the shows for the rest of the evening)
- Aim for “win-win” solutions, where everyone gets what is most important to them or most needed, even if it’s not an exact 50/50 split

Managing Fights Calmly

- Don’t sweat the small stuff: let them sort out minor disagreements where nobody is getting hurt
- If things are not resolving, put each point of view into words, and encourage problem-solving (e.g., “You want to use the Legos to build a house, and you want to use them for a truck. That’s tough. Any ideas that would work for both?—take turns, share, find a project both like, etc.)
- If it does get physical, attend to who is injured rather than who is doing the injuring (the latter results in negative attention, which increases the chances of it happening again)
- Don’t ask the world’s silliest question: Who started it? (Inevitably, each sibling will point the finger at the other.)
- Usually, one sibling is better at provoking and the other is better at reacting, so whenever possible time out both for fighting, not just the ‘reactor’ (This also gives you a breather!)

**Also see Siblings Without Rivalry on the Resources page*

