



Sibling Rivalry: What You Can Do



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"By a twist of fate, a child is born into a particular position in the family, and from this place, she will attempt to share

her parents' love and attention and get her basic needs met. This setup naturally causes jealousies and resentment among siblings."

-Birth Order Blues: How Parents Can Help Their Children Meet the Challenges of Birth Order

Sibling rivalry has existed as long as there have been families. It is a normal reaction for children to feel anger, jealousy and competition towards their siblings regardless of how much they may love each other. Even when there is a sense of abundance, children are competing for food, goods, and, of course, their parents' love.

Psychologists have found that the smaller

the age gap, the more competitive children tend to be. It is believed that this rivalry is a result of two (or more) children having similar needs and therefore vying for the same kind of attention. There are many things parents can do to prevent future sibling problems and help to resolve ones that have already begun.

Have clear consequences to undesirable behavior. Children should know what the consequences of their actions will be even before they act. It is important that there are set rules in the house and all children know that the punishments will be predictable and they will be enforced.

Parents should be a united front. Children often try to divide and conquer their parents. It is important that both parents be on the same page or at least present a united front to their children, regardless of whether they disagree in private. If one parent finds that he or she is not getting the same response when disciplining their children, it often means that the other parent needs to show the children that they are united. In other words disrespecting Mom will have the same consequences as disrespecting Dad.

Hitting is never acceptable. By allowing

children to hit each other you teach them that hitting is an acceptable form of communication among people they love. This is not gender specific. Boys should not be allowed to hit girls and girls should not be allowed to hit boys.

Use time outs. Time outs help children de-escalate a situation before it gets out of control. Adults need time outs too! Sometimes it can be really helpful to call in a friend or relative to give you a few hours away from screaming kids in order to come back and think with a clear head.

Honor differences in children. It is important to appreciate each child's strengths. This helps enhance self-esteem and identity. Spend

one-on-one time with each child every month. Children need to feel special. One of the best ways for him or her to feel important is to have time alone with each parent. Children who know they will have one-on-one time with each parent are less likely to fight for their parents' attention as much.

Help children find the words to express themselves. Children often have a difficult time comprehending what they are feeling and putting their emotions into words. Often the emotions that come up are confusing or perceived as shameful so children are reluctant to share them with their parents. It is the parents' job to normalize feelings of jealousy, anger and rivalry and to help children express these feelings in a productive way.

Have clear-cut rules and assignments. If children know whose turn it is to feed the dog, clear the table, etc. you will cut down on fights significantly.

Allow children to have their own possessions. Many parents are so worried that their children will not learn how to share that they forget that they are individuals who need to learn how to take care of their own possessions and make boundaries with others. Allow your children to have some toys that they don't have to share unless they want to.

Break things up when fights escalate. Many parents want their children to learn to work through conflict. While this is an admirable goal, your three year old cannot defend herself against your six year old fairly. That age difference makes it impossible for the younger child to be effective. Children need help mediating their conflicts in a constructive way.

The good news is that most siblings develop healthy fulfilling relationships with their brothers and sisters. Parents have the opportunity to help children develop a strong loving relationship if they help create a loving respectful foundation.

Dr. Jenn Berman is a psychotherapist and sports psychology consultant. She regularly appears on television and radio as an expert on psychological issues. For questions, comments, or advice to be used in one of her columns, she can be reached through her website at www.DoctorJenn.com.

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