Sibling Rivalry

Relationships between siblings can be some of the longest and strongest in human development. But parents often feel frustrated and helpless when sibling interaction includes fighting, bickering and name-calling. Most experts feel a certain amount of this behavior, called sibling rivalry, is natural, inevitable and even beneficial. This doesn't mean parents have to stand by and let children go at it. Rather, parents need to be proactive in guiding children as they learn acceptable ways to relate to each other.

Parents should set standards of acceptable behaviors children are expected to comply with:

- No hitting or other physically violent behavior is allowed.
- No name-calling; instead encourage children to express their feelings openly and honestly without injuring their siblings physically or verbally.
- No destroying property.
- You may want to display this list of rules in your home so you can call attention to the rule when it is broken.

Other things parents should keep in mind when dealing with sibling rivalry:

- Avoid forcing a child to apologize. Helping a child see things from the sibling's perspective will over time help him or her to better interpret behaviors and learn to be more compassionate and respectful; forcing an apology probably won't. "Look at your brother's face; it made him really mad when you…"
- Avoid making children play with each other. This usually results in negative feelings and conflict.
- When parents listen to a child and allow the child to verbally express frustration, the child's feelings will be validated. Try not to deny a child's feelings. Say, "You are really sad because your sister…" instead of "You don't really hate your sister."
- Help your child gain skills to deal with feelings in acceptable ways.
- Offer plenty of physical activity to help drain off negative feelings and excess energy.
- Creative activities like drawing or using clay can give a child a harmless way to deal with negative feelings.
- Avoid using labels to describe a child. Such things as "He's the shy one" or "She's the brainy one" can be limiting. Instead, encourage each child to stretch to roles that may be outside his or her usual behavior patterns.

- Avoid comparing one child in the family to another. Comparing siblings can fuel anger and negative feelings. Each child is unique, and that uniqueness is cause for celebration.
- Try to spend time alone with each child, each day, even if it's only 10 minutes.
- Accept the fact that not all siblings will end up being best friends. Children's temperaments and personalities will affect their compatibility.
- Stay out of battles that aren't breaking the family rules. Often, parents try to intervene in arguments that kids might be able to solve themselves.
- Be a "referee" from the sidelines. Clarify feelings - "your brother feels he isn't getting his turn" or "I can see you are really frustrated."

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- Ask for negotiation from both sides. "If your sister was willing to do this, what would you be willing to do?"
- Ask for ideas. "Who can think of an idea to solve this?"

Parents sometimes set the stage for some of the sibling rivalry in the home when they try to treat all children equally. Each child is an individual with his or her own likes, dislikes and needs. Rather than strictly enforce equal treatment, our goal should be to try to meet each child's needs as they arise in as fair a manner as possible. Many experts believe sibling rivalry is training for relationships outside the family. The skills learned, the practice in cooperation and negotiation, and yes, even the fighting and bickering, help children learn social skills for life.

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15-AMCK-0769 REV040319