

OLDER SIBLINGS AND SIBLING RIVALRY

Parents often take sibling conflicts more to heart than the children do. As a parent we recall feelings from our own family situation, both the positive and the negative. Our own children's rivalry makes us feel unsuccessful as a parent. There are steps a parent can take to minimize the rival feelings between siblings. Here are a few suggestions:

Model positive ways for your children to relate to each other. In his book, [Touchpoints](#), Dr. Brazelton describes the relationship.

"The ideal is to teach a child how to feel responsible for his sibling and for the whole family's well-being. Learning responsibility for others may be the most important thing you can teach him. That comes from learning to share with a sibling."

~ Dr. T. Berry Brazelton,
[Touchpoints](#)

This sharing also includes the attention of a parent.

Allow siblings to find their own solutions.

Most "fighting" among siblings is an attempt to gain the attention of a parent. The siblings believe an injustice has taken place. Each one is trying to convince the parent that he is right and the other is wrong. Do not step into the middle of the fight to become judge or jury. You then will have the task of deciding who was right and who was wrong! The fighting siblings have accomplished their goal of getting your attention and making their case. This is reinforcing the fighting behavior.

Avoid comparisons. Resist the urge to compare. Instead of comparing one child with another ("*Why can't you put away your books like your brother?*"), speak to the child only about the behavior that displeases you. Whatever you want to tell this child can be said directly without any reference to his sibling. "*I see books on the floor. That bothers*



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

me. The books belong on the shelf. Please put them there."

Spend time alone with each child. Each one of your children is unique!

Siblings can work out their own solutions. When parents must intervene, it should be with the thought that at the earliest possible moment, they will want to turn it back to the children. We want children to experience themselves as solvers of problems. That's the best preparation we can give them for the rest of their lives.

Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish suggest a five-step approach for parents to use when intervening in sibling fights in their book [Siblings Without Rivalry](#).

STEP ONE: Start by acknowledging the children's anger toward each other. "*You two sound mad at each other!*" That alone should calm them.

STEP TWO: Listen to each child's side with respect. Reflect each child's point of view. "*So Sara, you want to keep on holding the puppy, because he's just settled down in your arms. And you Billy, feel you're entitled to a turn, too.*"

STEP THREE: Show appreciation for the problem. Describe the problem with respect. "*That's a tough one: Two children and only one puppy.*"

STEP FOUR: Express confidence in the children's ability to find their own solution. "*I have confidence that you two can work out a solution that's fair to each of you. . . and fair to the puppy.*"

STEP FIVE: Leave the room.

When parents use this approach, they are intervening not to settle the argument or make a judgment, but to open blocked channels of communication. The children can then go back to dealing with each other.

If the fighting is heading toward hurting, adult intervention is necessary. Faber and Mazlish offer three tips to follow:

1. Describe.

"I see one boy on a chair about to throw a truck! And I see another boy about to hit with a baseball bat! And both of them are furious!"

2. Establish Limits.

"This is a very dangerous situation. We must have a cooling-off period!"

3. Separate them.

"Quick! You to your room, and you to yours!"

Growing up with siblings provides children an important laboratory to learn social skills they will need throughout life. However noisy and unpleasant, sibling disagreements can provide practice for negotiating and learning "what works" in social relationships.