

OPINION

continued

Suggestions for sibling rivalry

There is a Vietnamese saying, "Brothers and sisters are as close as hands and feet." But siblings also use those hands and feet to push and kick and drive each other crazy! How can parents manage conflict between siblings? What is the line between exuberant play and unacceptable behavior?

First, consider your standards for what is and is not acceptable in your home. How much rough-housing is acceptable? How neat do you keep your home? This varies between families, and what is most important is that your standards are consistent between your children. For example, if a tidy house is a value, how can each child contribute toward this at their own developmental level?

When an older sibling has to help with the dishes, they are less resentful if they see a younger sibling also has to help pick up their own toys. That old line - you are older and should know better - only fuels resentment and leads to conflict. Fairness is paramount for school-aged children, and the idea that they have to help out at home while their younger sibling does not can be overwhelming. If you use behavior charts for your children, be sure everyone has a task to be completed and a goal they are working toward. This will build up a sense of family pride.

Allowing your children to work out their own conflicts within the family gives them the knowledge that they are capable. With more serious fights, parents sometimes try to sort out "who started it." If you really don't know, give a consequence to both.



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Many of us with brothers and sisters can remember a look or a whispered word starting a physical conflict. You want to convey the message that you have zero tolerance for hurting, no matter who said the first word or gave the first pinch. If the give and take of sibling conflicts is clearly one-sided, it is time to look more carefully at the situation. Is one child bullying another? Is one of your children fearful of another sibling? As with any bullying situation, you need to take this seriously and be sure the children are safely supervised while you work with the more aggressive child to reduce this behavior. If the bullying continues, it may be time to consult with a professional to help you understand why this is happening and to develop some strategies for your family.

In some families with two parents, children seem to gravitate toward one parent or

another. This can be a phase, or a typical way of relating. Be sure that both parents have special time with each sibling alone. That is easier said than done when parents are working, and children are extremely busy with school and extra-curricular activities. But it can be as simple as taking turns reading at bedtime, or being sure that you set aside some game time for each child during the week. Children may look like they are fighting for no reason, but it is sometimes a way to get attention. It is important to be careful about how you use your language and not insist that one child is just like mom, while the other is like dad. This highlights differences which can make it more difficult for their relationship, especially if there is some marital conflict.

Although it might not always look like it in childhood, we know that siblings can be a lifelong source of grounding and support. By being attentive to supporting these developing relationships, parents promote harmony in the present, as well as family cohesion into future generations.

Note: The information provided should not be used during a mental health emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of a mental health condition. A licensed mental health professional should be consulted for a diagnosis and treatment. Call 911 for mental health emergencies.

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