

# **Positive Parenting: Bringing up responsible, well-behaved and happy children**

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## **Chapter - Sibling Rivalry and Fighting**

My son who is eight seems to be constantly picking on his sister who is six. We don't seem to have a day without her screaming that he has hit her and then me having to go in to separate them. I send him to his room when I catch him at it, but he still seems to be angry. Some days it can feel like they are fighting and squabbling all day long

Sibling rivalry characterised by constant fighting and bickering is one of the most common childhood problems that parents face. Indeed, many other problems that parents identify such as a child being aggressive or having low self-esteem or constantly seeking attention are often best understood in the context of rivalry with brothers and sisters. Certainly many other problems are made worse if there is also rivalry going on.

At the heart of sibling rivalry is competition for parents love and attention. Children are generally 'fighting' for their parents approval and for their place in the family. There may be particular reasons for the rivalry – For example one child might feel inadequate because his brother is getting on better at school? Or an older child might feel a little jealous of younger child who is getting more attention.

Generally, sibling rivalry only becomes an ongoing or constant problem, when the parent gets hooked into being a referee, sorting out the children's problems and deciding who is right and wrong. The strange thing though is that being a referee in this way generally makes the problem worse. The child judged by you to be at fault usually feels wronged and resentful towards you and his brother or sister, and is likely to restart the fight to seek justice. The child who was deemed to be right enjoys your approval and is likely to draw you in again in the same way (by crying or whining) to regain your support. Both children are likely to continue to involve you in the fight in order to win your approval and neither of them learns how to sort out the dispute by themselves.

In some situations, a pattern can build up over time, with one child being characterised as a 'problem' child who starts the fights and the other child being the 'victim' who can't stand up for himself. Both children 'live into' the descriptions and they can become self-fulfilling prophecies. It is as easy as parent only to see the same pattern – for example you only see the older child picking on the younger one (but don't see how the younger one winds him up or deliberately annoys him when you not looking)

*The solution to sibling rivalry lies in never taking sides in your children's dispute (even when you feel one of them is wrong or started the problem). Instead you insist they sort out the dispute themselves and if you have to discipline them for fighting, this is always done equally.*

Taking this absolutely fair stance is often hard for parents to do, so let's look at this in more detail from a prevention and discipline point of view

### **Discipline Plan – Responding to sibling fighting**

The following is a possible step-by-step plan for responding to a dispute or fight between your children

#### 1) Wait before getting involved

Rather than jumping in immediately the minute a fight or dispute happens, it can be useful to pause and to give your children a chance to sort out the dispute themselves

#### 2) Remind the children of the good behaviour you want

If the children continue to fight, rather than criticising or refereeing simply give the children a positive instruction asking them to behave well (see Step 6)

- 'Listen guys, I want the two of you to calm down in here' or
- 'Please come to an agreement now and calm down'

It can help to be really encouraging and to express a belief in their ability to get on

- 'Come on lads I know the two of you can get on well together, let's see some of that now'

#### 3) Problem solve

If the children continue to fight, one option is to support them in sorting out the problem. You do this, by encouraging them to listen to one another and to come up with their own ideas and solutions

- 'OK both of you want to play with the play station, how can we sort this out?'
- 'OK we have one play station and two people wanting to play, what are some solutions here?'

Though problem solving in the heat of the row can be hard, it can work if you remain calm and don't get drawn into the row. It has the advantage that you show your children how to remain calm and to resolve conflict

#### 4) Use an equal consequence

If the children continue to fight, you can also use an equal consequence. This is best offered as a choice and should always be fair and imposed equally.

- 'Look guys if you continue to fight you will both have to go to your rooms/'
- 'Look guys, if I have to come in again, you are both going to lose some pocket money'

Over time, this fair approach removes the reason to fight - which is essentially a fight over your approval and attention. See Step 6 and 7 for more information on using consequences effectively.

## ***Prevention Plan – Helping your children learn to get on and sort out disputes***

### **Problem Solve together**

To help your children get on, it can be a good idea to sit down with them together (at a good time when they are away from the original fight) and to help them sort out their disagreements. As a parent your focus is on finding solution rather than analysing who is wrong. Rather than being a 'judge' or taking sides start by saying what you want e.g.: 'I want to help the two of you learn to get on more, so things will be happier in the house. Then your job is to listen to both their points of view (and to help them listen to each other) and then to guide them equally to take responsibility for solutions. 'What can you both do to make things go smoother between you? The next step is to listen to your children and encourage them to come up with their own ideas to solve things. (See Step 9 for a more information on problems solving with children)

### **Problem Solve individually**

Sometimes it can help to talk the problem through individually with a child. Once again, the core principle is not to take sides or to collude with your child against his brother or sister (even though this child is not present). You can be sympathetic and listen to your child's feelings but you don't make a judgement and instead help them think of the other child's feelings and what can be done to sort things out. For example if your daughter comes running to you complaining that her brother hit her, rather than rushing in to judge, you can be sympathetic (I'm sorry that happened') listen to what happened (It sounds like you were both annoyed) and then help your daughter think of solutions (what can you do the next time this happens?)

Equally, rather than lecturing an older brother that they should give just get on with their younger brother you can first appreciate his feelings ('It can be hard having a little brother sometimes when he seems to get all the attention'), help him understand his brother's feelings (what do you think he feels?) and once again focus on solutions (what can you do the next time you feel annoyed?)

The key in both the examples, is not rushing to take sides but instead staying impartial or as I like to put *staying on both your children's sides* (and never supporting one over the other) See Step 9 for a more information on problems solving with children.

### **Set aside one to one time with your children**

Sibling rivalry can be really helped by ensuring you have regular one to one time with each of your children when you can appreciate their unique talents and personality and when you can enjoy their company and spend relaxing time with them. This can relieve them of the 'need' to fight for your attention. This can work very well in situations when an older child is jealous of the younger child who appears to be getting all the attention. By setting aside a regular special time with this child, which is sacrosanct ( and not interrupted by the younger sibling) can make a big difference in reducing jealousy. See Step 2 for more information on using positive parental attention in play.

### Love your Children Uniquely

Competition between children is aggravated by comparisons. One child feels inadequate because the other is doing better at school or in sports or with friends. As a parent it is important not to get drawn into comparisons but instead to appreciate the unique talents and interests of each of your children. You enjoy and appreciate one child's talent in music and the others in sport. If one child is feeling inadequate, the key is to find their area of strength and passion and to notice this with the same amount of attention as the other child.

### Set up shared activities between your children

Helping your children play together and work together as a team is one sure way to reduce rivalry and to help them bond together. You can do this by encouraging them to work together in a shared household task or by supporting them playing together. When you see any moments of sharing, be sure to notice this saying for example, 'you gave your brother some of your cars, it is good to see you sharing'. Or 'that was kind – you helped your sister out' or 'it is great to see the two of you working together as team.' See Step 3 for more information on playing with two children.

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