



by Karen Stephens

Sibling Rivalry: Ways to Help Children Manage It

Warm, supportive sibling attachment is a wonderful parenting goal. After all, siblings are the people who will know each other longest. They hold an insider's view of formative years that influence each other's adult values, beliefs, and personality.

But in every family, sibling rivalry crops up. In fact, reasonable sibling rivalry supports children's social and emotional development.

Through daily give and take, siblings learn to get along with others, to consider others' perspectives, and to stand up for their own point of view.

Below are parenting strategies to consider so children reap the benefits of a healthy sibling relationship — including the inevitable bumps of rivalry:

- Root out suspected causes of rivalry. Observe children's behavior to gain insight. Are children jockeying for family position? Are they trying to get adult attention or distract them? Are they fighting over a particular toy, friend, or relative? Does play deteriorate into fighting at a particular time of day, such as when the kids are hungry or tired?
- Prevent rivalry causes as is reasonably possible. Reflect on answers to the above questions to help you plan prevention steps.
- Role model constructive interactions. Make sure children observe you solving problems by talking and negotiating with a family member.
- Create a cooperative, supportive home atmosphere. Include spaces where it's easier to get along.
- For preschooler and school-age children, create a "safe zone" where they can play without fear of younger toddler siblings destroying their toys or projects.
- Firmly and consistently set and enforce boundaries for acceptable behavior. Refuse to tolerate cruel and/or hurtful name calling; otherwise children assume approval.
- Coach children on ways to respectfully express feelings, points of view, and desires. Frequently affirm everyone's right to have their point of view considered.
- State behavior guidelines positively. State what children *can* do, rather than only what they can't do. For instance, a rule can be: "Arguments will be solved by talking it out. Hitting is not allowed."
- Establish reasonable consequences for aggressive behaviors and enforce them consistently.
- Guide arguing siblings along problem solving steps to resolve conflict, which include: identify the problem; brainstorm solution options; note pros and cons of each option; select one option to try out; and repeat steps as needed.
- Provide some "personal territory" for each child. A personal closet or drawer is reasonable.

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- Don't go overboard on giving children too much private space. For instance, a TV in each child's room to limit fights isn't a wise strategy. It robs children of the chance to negotiate and enjoy a shared experience. Separating children too much encourages retreat and isolation rather than compromise.
- Don't expect siblings to share all the same friends. Encourage each child's personal friendships, along with some shared friends and relatives.
- Avoid labeling children as competitors or enemies. Resist making unflattering sibling comparisons and criticisms; they simply fuel rivalry. Instead, put a more positive, hopeful spin to comments. For instance, say "I look forward to you two cooperating with each other," rather than, "Why can't you kids ever get along?"

In fact, reasonable sibling rivalry supports children's social and emotional development.

- Specifically note and encourage each child's personal strengths and uniqueness whenever possible.
- Avoid playing favorites. It's normal for a parent to feel a special closeness to particular child from time to time. But strive to be ethical and resist showing an obvious preference. Jealousy, resentment, and hate brew when parents play favorites.
- If siblings skirmish, don't force siblings to say "I'm sorry" if they clearly are not. Why encourage lying? Instead allow children a cooling off period and then suggest they find a way to "make amends" and move on. Forgiveness comes more easily to children than most adults; a little time is usually what they need.
- Encourage and praise the positive. Compliment siblings out loud whenever they get along. Give them a new privilege to reward their cooperative behavior.
- Don't make siblings constantly share your time and attention. Regularly spend undistracted one-on-one time with each child. Some parents use story time for this. Others allow for extra cuddles at nap or television time. Take turns having one child run an errand or complete a household chore with you.
- Consistently point out attachment to and affection for siblings: "I really admire what good friends you've become."
- Be respectful of kids' favorite possessions. Ask permission before giving a younger sibling an older child's special toys, comfort item, furniture or clothing.
- Respond rarely to low-key bickering and "rough and tumble" play. Children are usually just having fun that adults don't appreciate. Give siblings a chance to manage issues themselves. Children settling minor skirmishes independently fosters good conflict resolution and social skills.

If Sibling Rivalry Becomes Severe

If sibling rivalry is excessive or regularly involves aggression and verbal assaults, seek the help of other skilled parents or a family counselor. Such out of control behaviors may include: prolonged screaming; throwing items; physical injury; profanity; demeaning humiliation; cruel teasing and tricking, or other forms of physical or emotional attack.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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