

Sibling Rivalry; Inevitable but Not Fatal!



Why can't they just get along?

Rivalry happens between children in most families. Having a brother or sister is wonderful, but it doesn't mean they will always get along. Sibling rivalry, or competition between the children in a family, is usually a struggle to protect a share of the parents' love and attention, a result of envy of a sibling's skills or accomplishments, or frustration over what seems to be special privileges one sibling receives that the other does not. Throw into the mix the birth order of the child (youngest, oldest) and the sex of the child and sometimes the arguing seems never-ending. This is, of course, very disturbing to parents.

So, now what?

The good news is that in most cases, the difficulties will be worked out without doing too much damage to the "rivals" or their eventual relationship. Rivalry, within limits, can even be a learning experience for children. They get practice in developing problem-solving skills and learning how to negotiate, make compromises and share. Parents need to understand and accept that they cannot force closeness or affection between siblings who are fighting. A parent's job is to help children develop the skills they need to have good relationships with others; skills such as understanding, patience, and tolerance of differences. An important first step is to recognize the difference between feelings and actions. It is okay for siblings to have negative feelings about each other, but it is not okay to hurt each other.

Parents can help by:

- Allowing negative feelings to be shared within the family. It's okay to get mad.
- Encouraging children to talk about their feelings.
- Remaining calm and not getting upset when children talk about how they feel.
- Recognizing the individual differences, talents and interests between children. Avoiding comparisons between children such as "When Susie was your age she could already ride a bicycle."
- Showing problem-solving skills to children, such as how to listen to each other and how to think about and make choices before taking action.
- Setting limits and ground rules for working out problems and then backing off!
- Paying more attention to children when they are cooperating than when they are fighting. Catch them being good.
- Setting up a system for receiving special privileges or for taking turns.

The lesson here is for parents to allow and encourage children to work things out between themselves whenever possible. Parents can assist the process by setting some basic ground rules (e.g. no hitting or hurting, etc.). Then after the rules are understood, parents can step back to put the responsibility for solving problems into the children's hands.



Sibling rivalry that occurs when a new baby arrives

There is a special sibling rivalry that occurs with the birth of a new baby brother or sister. The older sibling now has to share parental affection as well as parental time and family privileges. It's no wonder the child is not necessarily overjoyed to be a big sister or brother.

Parents can help by:

- Letting the child know in advance when baby is arriving and what to expect.
- Explaining to the child that the new baby will need a lot of attention, but reassuring the child will still have special mommy or daddy time after baby's arrival.
- Encouraging the child to talk about feelings, or to draw pictures of these feelings.
- Involving the child in planning for the new baby and asking for his or her help.
- Keeping the older child's routines in place as much as possible after baby's birth to help the child adjust and feel secure.
- Understanding that the older child's actions and behavior may revert to that of a younger self for a period of time.
- Allowing the child to help choose "hand-me-downs" of toys, clothes, cribs etc. rather than just assuming the child no longer wants or needs these items.

