Sibling rivalry

We all hope that our children will love and appreciate one another. Yet disagreements and fighting among siblings is natural. In fact, sibling rivalry occurs among non-human animals as well as people. In both cases, the cause is competition over limited or scarce resources. While animals compete for food, humans vie for their parent's love, approval, attention and time.



Sibling rivalry teaches life skills

Believe it or not, sibling rivalry can actually provide valuable life lessons and skills for your children. By interacting with their brothers and sisters, children learn what it means to be part of a relationship. This means giving and receiving, as well as arguing and agreeing. Learning to deal with disagreements among siblings can help children develop skills they will use in social situations now and in their adult years. These skills include:

- Negotiation
- Compromise
- Assertiveness
- Conflict resolution
- Aggression control
- Valuing others' opinions

Bringing a new baby home

Sibling rivalry can begin as soon as a new brother or sister arrives. No matter how well you think you've prepared your first-born for this event, the birth of a new brother or sister changes their lives forever. They lose their status as the centre of attention and can feel betrayed and less loved. After all, the amount of time the parent spends with this child is usually cut in half. Babies require a lot of attention and effort, and cause parents to be tired and even irritable at times.

Young children will, therefore, find ways of getting the attention they need—crying, whining, clinging or regressing (returning to crawling, wetting their pants, bottles or pacifiers). They might even resort to hurting the new baby or trying to find ways of making him or her seem less attractive to the parents.

The following are factors often associated with sibling rivalry:

Age differences. Although sibling rivalry can begin the day the new baby comes home, it can occur at any age. In fact, it’s not uncommon for older siblings to begin showing aggression to their younger brother or sister. Often, children become competitive or feel jealous of their brothers and sisters when they think their parents are spending more time or paying more attention to their siblings. This can cause bickering or even fights.

For example, a 12-year-old boy may begin to torment his younger sister because he is secretly jealous of the physical affection she receives. Since he is older and seemingly not interested in being tucked in at night or being hugged when he arrives home, his parents may not even realize that he is missing these physical signs of affection.

Personality types. The interaction and/or friction between your children will also depend on their individual personalities. For example, one may be an extrovert who seeks interaction, while the other may be introverted, wanting to spend more time alone. These two personality types may not get along. The individual characteristics of the children also affect their relationships. Some children are fussier or easily bored while some can be tense or easily frustrated.

Family. Sibling relationships can be affected by, or mirror, family conflict. If parents are experiencing marital friction, the children feel the stress and tension, and may fight with one another. When parents are uncaring or angry with each other, siblings may begin to treat their brothers or sisters this way as well.

When rivalry turns to conflict

Unfortunately, jealousy or competition can sometimes cause children to fight. Psychologists and family therapists generally agree that when children of a similar age and intellectual level fight physically, parents should not necessarily get involved.

However, if physical violence or damage to the other's personal property or personal space is involved, a parent should step in. If there is a significant difference in age, parents should closely monitor any fights and be prepared to intervene.

While sibling rivalry is normal, your family can only endure a certain amount of conflict, so it’s important to try to keep it under control.

Parent's guide for handling sibling spats

As a parent, don't fuel the rivalry by asking, "Who started it?" Simply separate the two children. Teach children conflict management strategies and allow them to resolve conflicts on their own—e.g., finding ways to trade, take turns using a timer, etc. Finally, end the battle if one child is hurting, bullying or teasing the other.

Child psychologists suggest that parents should help their children learn to be civil to one another and set some guidelines for acceptable behaviour among siblings. For example, siblings need to understand that they do not have the right to behave badly to one another. They don't have to be friends and share everything, but they must behave decently and respectfully to one another. It’s also important to ensure there are consequences to confrontational sibling behaviour.

It's a good idea to set some family ground rules or guidelines for sibling behaviour. These may be general, such as treating each other with respect, or more specific by stating that no hitting, pinching or any kind of violence or name-calling are allowed. Why not have a family meeting to create some limits or rules that everyone can live by? Getting the children to set their own standards is an important component of gaining buy-in and co-operation. Consider:

- Avoiding comparisons—these can lead to competition
- Forgetting equality—celebrate each child's differences and unique abilities, and treat them accordingly
- Setting expectations for acceptable behaviour and show confidence in your children's abilities to handle their own conflicts
- Commending good behaviour
- Acknowledging negative feelings
- Not reacting to their anger with hostility
- Making time for children separately

Although it may be difficult for any parent to watch their children conflict, there are steps you can take to encourage more loving behaviour. Be sure that you and your spouse set a positive example for your children, and keep open family communication a priority. If you have additional questions regarding sibling rivalry, consult with a family psychologist or your child’s school guidance counsellor.