

Sibling Rivalry; Five tips to decrease the fighting

When our kids have been taught skills to work out disagreements and been made aware of family rules, we are in a good place to limit our involvement in their disagreements and as a result decrease the amount of bickering in our homes. Here are five tips to help you do this:

1. Discuss any changes you are making with everyone ahead of time. Be calm and allow the kids to question the process. Adapt the wording to fit the maturity level of your kids.

“You all have skills for working out disagreements with each other and from here on in I’m going to let you practice them. Remember our house rules and understand it will always be in your best interest to work things out without involving me.”

2. When your kids start to argue, remove yourself from the listening zone. Acknowledge their disagreement and leave: “I know you two can work this out.” Disappear into your bedroom, bathroom – anywhere they can’t easily follow you. Read, exercise, or write a shopping list, whatever works to distract you. If the kids were after your attention the disagreement will quickly fizzle out.
3. When you don’t want to leave the room or can’t (i.e. in the car), use a statement like the one above and then put on your earphones, turn up the radio, sing, read (or pretend to)...whatever it takes so they know you aren’t willing to participate.
4. Put a time limit on how long they have to work it out before you step in and decide for them. “You have five minutes to work this out and then I will make the decision for you.” Ignore them for the stated amount of time. If they work it out, compliment them and move on. If they are still arguing when the time is up, make the decision – which is final – and is never in favor of either child. **Your job at this point is not to help them both be happy... if you do this it will be your job for life!**

If they were arguing over a movie you might decide “no movie”... or a movie you know they both dislike. If they were fighting over name calling you might insist they both say three nice things about each other. If they try to argue with you add in three nice things about you too. If they refuse, send them off on their own (i.e. to their room) and only allow them to return when they have their nice things ready.

5. If you can tell things are escalating too fast, give less time (i.e. ten to thirty seconds) to work it out and then step in. They need some time to try and find

their self control, but too much time could result in serious damage. After the allotted time calmly step in and use ideas like the following:

“You two just can’t seem to get along right now. Brianna, grab your book and sit here, Stephanie, take your drawing stuff to the kitchen and work there. Let me know when you think you’re ready to work together again.”

“You two need to sit down and neither of you may get up until the other one gives you permission to do so.” Or “You two can both go to your rooms and may not come out until the other one says it’s okay for you to do so.”

You may need to put something on the line to keep them from ignoring you (i.e. a privilege like TV time). These strategies work because the kids must work together (i.e. give each other permission) before they can move on.

A few extra pointers to ensure success with these tactics:

- During the initial meeting discuss what will happen if the argument keeps resurfacing. A parent imposed consequence might be necessary.
- Apologies are welcome but not a requirement of the process. Forced apologies are worthless and cause more grief than they are worth.
- Stay calm and enforce consequences. If you get angry the focus shifts from skill development to punishment to resentment.
- Be prepared for the kids and to test this change. Be strong and know that what you are doing is definitely in everyone’s best interest.

Disagreements are part of every day life...it is critical our kids develop skills to help them deal with conflicts. If we can teach our kids how to work out their disagreements with each other, over time we will require our referee whistle less and less and our kids will be better people for it.