

## Sibling Rivalry; Why Kids Fight

Childhood is a time of learning and growing. A time when mistakes are made, boundaries are pushed and problems are solved. These challenges continue into adulthood, the only difference is, once we are adults people expect us to have learned some skills to deal with them.

Whether we like it or not, our kids learn most of these skills from watching us. When they see us lose our self-control to anger, or watch us calmly work our way through a problem, they are taking the information in and filing it away for future use.

When our children disagree we are being given an opportunity to really help them grow and learn. Unfortunately, many of us see these disagreements as a frustrating problem and deal with it by yelling, threatening, or punishing them for their behaviour. When we do this we are missing a great opportunity and actually creating further conflict.

The opposite extreme is when we witness their fighting and write it off as normal or unavoidable sibling behaviour. This can work out okay, if the children are naturally born with some skills, but if they are not (which is much more common) it can lead to frustration, anger, and resentment. Over time this can become damaging to their relationship with each other and with us.

Our goal when our children argue is to see these disagreements as a way to practice skill development. When we do this we remove most of the frustration and instead model the behaviours we would really like them to learn. The wonderful side-effect of doing this is that many of the petty arguments will disappear.

A later article will look at tips for dealing with the rivalry. This article is aimed at helping parents understand some of the reasons for the fights. When we are aware of why our kids are fighting it becomes easier for us to maintain our self-control.

Common reasons kids argue:

- To get attention
- They feel an injustice has been done
- They spend a lot of time together
- The family is a safe group to vent frustrations on
- Their social skills are still developing
- They are tired, hot, hungry, stressed, grouchy or otherwise bothered
- They are full of energy and really enjoy the physical release

These reasons are understandable and provide perfect opportunities to do some teaching. While we might feel frustrated that our child is such an “attention-hound”, it does let us know that giving him attention for this kind of behaviour will not work in our favour. It also tells us that if we can teach him other (more positive) ways to get our attention our time with him will be more enjoyable.

If he feels an injustice has been done, it gives us an opportunity to turn judgment into curiosity and perhaps fix a misunderstanding. If our child craves physical outlets for his energy we might enroll him in recreational activity to help him do this. There is a lot of helpful information that comes from understanding why our children are going after each other. We just have to be aware of what's going on.

It is important when looking at this list that we do not write off our kids' behaviours as acceptable, just because it is understandable. A tired or hungry child, still needs to control her behaviour and part of our job is to help her understand that. As well, even though the family is a safe place to vent, it is not okay to treat people disrespectfully, even if it is your irritating little sister.

There are a few other reasons that kids will fight which tend to be a bit more serious in nature:

- Personality conflict
- To feel powerful
- They are jealous of their sibling
- They have a chemical imbalance that is interfering with their regular behaviour
- They have learned it is fun and are becoming a bully

These reasons are more serious, and, left alone, can result in damaging situations. They are harder to correct and can have very negative results if you do not. If you believe you are dealing with issues from this grouping it can be helpful to get assistance from professionals. Parent Educators, Social Workers or Family Centres are a few of the places you might go to seek help.

If you are uncertain what the cause of your children's fighting might be you have a couple of options. You can seek out help to identify the cause, or try some of the generic techniques offered first (available in future articles). Then if the problem persists or gets worse over time, go for help.

Whatever you decide to do, it is beneficial to remember that siblings will have disagreements while they are growing up. This does not make them bad or defective and does not turn you into a bad parent. On the contrary these situations are gifts. They are opportunities to teach and practice important, life-long skills.

So while we might not celebrate sibling rivalry... at the very least hopefully we can see there are some positives.

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