

# ***SIBLING RIVALRY AMONG OLDER CHILDREN***



Sibling rivalry is a normal, healthy part of life. No matter how well-behaved siblings are, they will occasionally fight or argue with each other.

The severity and frequency of sibling rivalry depends on many things, including age difference, personality, age of children, and how fighting is handled by parents.

It is generally thought that the younger children are, the more rivalry there will be. Rivalry does

seem to decrease as children get older. It is also thought that the closer in age the children are, the more rivalry there will be. There is generally more competitiveness between children who are close in age.

While there is little parents can do to completely eliminate rivalry between their children, there are some steps that can be taken to minimize it.

## **Why Sibling Rivalry Occurs**

Whether siblings fight a lot or a little, there is usually no one specific cause. Rivalry occurs for a number of reasons. They differ from family to family and from sibling to sibling. Here are some common reasons why siblings fight.

**\*Status** - Many siblings fight for position in the family.

**\*Attention** - Many siblings fight to get their parents' attention.

**\*Ownership** - Many children fight over belongings, friends, and parents' time.

## How to Minimize Sibling Rivalry

### **\*Treat children as individuals.**

Parents should stress their children's unique traits and individuality and should acknowledge their individual accomplishments.

### **\*Praise getting-along behaviors.**

Parents should catch their children being good and should praise them for getting along. Parents should be specific in their praise, so their children know exactly what they are being praised for. For example "That's great how you're playing and getting along so well." Praise can be an excellent motivator of good behavior. Parents should be careful not to use praise as a way of comparing children. This will quickly backfire.

**\*Spend time alone with your children.** No matter how many children are in the family, each child needs individual attention from both parents **on a regular basis**. Special alone-time with children need not be complicated. Reading, taking a walk, or running an errand are all simple ways for parents to spend special time with each of their children. Spending time alone with each child not only cuts down on rivalry, but it also strengthens the relationship between parents and their children.

**\*Be aware of your problem-solving style.** Parents should pay attention to how they get along with other adults, including their spouses. Children learn how to handle conflicts by watching their parents. Parents should show their children appropriate ways to solve problems.

**\*Provide lots of love and affection for your children.** Parents should show their children often that they love them through words and actions.

**\*Encourage children to spend time alone.** Parents should encourage each of their children to participate in activities separate from those of other siblings.

## Don'ts

**\*Don't compare children to one another.** Parents should try to avoid comparisons, even positive ones. If parents hold one child up as an example to another, they run the risk of intensifying rivalry. Comparisons may cause hurt feelings and hopelessness, too, if one child feels he or she can't or doesn't measure up.

**\*Don't take sides.** Parents should try to remain neutral bystanders in sibling fights. Children often try to involve their parents in arguments

with siblings as a way to gain control over the situation. Parents should try to stay out of fights between children who can stick up for themselves. The only exception is for physical fights. Parents should step in when fights become physical. They should make sure their children know that they are not allowed to hurt each other. Stepping in, however, does not need to imply that parents are taking sides. One good way of maintaining neutrality is to simply demand an end to the hostilities and to refuse to listen to arguments and explanations.

**\*Don't overreact to sibling disputes.** Disputes are bound to happen, and children learn how to handle disputes by watching their parents. Parents who overreact may end up reinforcing the rivalrous behavior.

### **How to Deal with Sibling Rivalry When it Occurs**

**\*Teach alternatives to fighting.** Before children can handle their disputes on their own, they need the tools to do so. Parents should show children acceptable alternatives to fighting, such as walking away, compromising, and negotiating.

**\*Encourage discussion.** Children need to be given the chance to talk about how they feel. Parents should also encourage the expression of feelings in positive ways. If children do not want to talk about their feelings, parents should accept that as their right. Parents should make sure their children know that they can come to them if and when they decide to talk.

**\*Set specific getting-along rules.** Children need to know exactly what is expected of them. If parents tell their children to "get along," they need to know exactly what that means (for example, no hitting, or name calling). For older children, it may help if parents write out and post rules.

**\*Don't feel you have to treat each of your children exactly the same.** Each child has a different age and personality. It is impossible to treat them the same.

**\*Ignore tattling.** Children often use tattling as a way to improve their status with their parents. Parents should simply ignore it. They can say something like "I'm sorry you and your brother aren't getting along." If children report some behavior that must be stopped, parents can

stop the behavior without addressing the tattling.

**\*Give children the responsibility for resolving conflicts.** Parents should try not to get pulled into the position of judge in children's arguments. Instead, parents should let their children solve their own problems (unless children are mismatched, e.g., one is much older than the other). Parents should ignore minor conflicts and let their children work out solutions on their own.

**\*Step in, however, if fights become physical.** Children must not be allowed to hurt each other. If physical fights are tolerated by parents, children run the risk of learning that violence is one way to solve conflicts.

**\*Use time-out.** Time-out is a technique that involves putting children in a very boring place for several minutes. Time-out should be used for behaviors that just can't be ignored, either ones that are very dangerous or very bad.

**\*Avoid situations that bring about rivalrous behavior.** If there are specific situations or activities that bring about rivalrous behavior between siblings, such as a particular

game or a particular toy, parents should try to limit their children's exposure to such things.

Sibling rivalry is a fact of life. There will always be disagreements between siblings. However, parents can use these opportunities to teach their children how to resolve conflicts. This is a very important tool to have later in life. Sibling rivalry has its positive side, too. In learning how to deal with rivalry, children learn how to cooperate, problem-solve, and negotiate. They will probably grow up to be more tolerant of other people, and more generous, too.



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