



**Parents often worry about their children quarrelling or fighting with each other. A certain amount of conflict is normal between children in families. It is one of the ways that they learn how to get on with other people. Sometimes parents will need to step in when tempers become frayed and you can see that things are getting out of control or someone is being hurt.**

*This PEG uses 'he' and 'she' in turn.  
Change to suit your child's sex.*

## Conflict and arguing between children

Arguments between brothers and sisters are one of the ways that children learn the importance of respecting other people's feelings and belongings. It is also one of the ways children learn to sort out problems. Learning to argue fairly and without hurting each other at home will help children learn how to sort out issues for other relationships in the future.

### What causes this conflict?

- Children in families fight about parents' love and compete for your attention or time. If you seem to have more time for one child than you do for another, they are likely to be jealous. Many adult children can still get upset and feel jealous of their siblings.
- Often an older child who feels hurt and angry will try to get at a new baby or younger child in some way. If the parents then rescue the younger child (as they have to) and at the same time punish the older child, it makes the older child feel more unloved and misunderstood.
- A habit can develop, where one child always seems to be the one who starts the fights. The parents feel that they should rescue the child who is being picked on. This makes the one who 'started it' feel worse, and so this child will start another fight when the chance comes.
- Learning to live together in a family takes some sorting out with different ages, needs and personalities involved. Some conflict is to be expected and is very normal (but not always easy to live with!).

*Remember the child who seems to start the quarrel is not always the one who does so. Often one child will do something to annoy the other child knowing he will react and then get into trouble.*

### What parents can do

Here are some steps you can take to help prevent quarrels.

- Protect the needs of each child, eg prevent older children's activities from being messed up by younger children and vice versa.
- Spend special time with each child on a regular basis.
- Allow each child to own some special things that they don't have to share.
- For younger children, see that there are more than one of the same toys such as Matchbox cars so that they can play together without having to share. Two second-hand tricycles are often better fun than one new one that has to be shared.
- If you have three children, make sure that the same one is not left out every time. Invite other children over.
- Children need their own bit of space which will not be interfered with by others, even if it is only a special drawer.
- Try not to compare children with each other - this always leads to bad feelings.
- Be generous with hugs and affection to all your children.
- Together make 'ground rules' about what behaviour is not allowed in your home, eg no name calling or hitting. Then if you have to step in, you do so because someone has broken a rule that everyone knows about, and not to just take sides.

- When you can see that children are feeling upset, help them to find ways to express their feelings. For younger children, play that helps with feelings includes water play, painting, playdough. For older children and teenagers doing things like going for a run or playing their music can help. Talk with them about what helps them.

*Children need you to teach them how to solve problems, to listen to each other and then to look for solutions that are fair to both.*

## When you have to step in

*They don't always need an umpire. It is sometimes better not to step in but to let your children learn to sort things out for themselves. You need to step in when someone is about to get hurt or things are getting out of control.*

- Be aware of your own feelings. If you are feeling angry with one child or more loving towards another, make sure that you are fair.
- If children come to you for help to sort out a problem, try not to take sides. Remember you probably did not see how it all began. If tempers are not out of control, listen to each child so that each feels heard. Tell them that you understand that it is a difficult problem and that you think they can probably sort it out for themselves. Suggest they try this first. You might have to remind them of the family rules.
- Help them to listen to each other's feelings and try to work out ways to solve the problem. Work with them to think of options if they seem stuck. For example, if they are fighting over a TV program you might say, "Joe wants to watch this program and Maria wants to watch the other one. What are some things you can think of to do that would be fair and make you both happy?" You might have to help with suggestions at first. When they have agreed on a solution, give it a try and then check to make sure it is working. If not, have another try at working it out. This is good training for when they are older and need to be able to solve their own problems.

## If you need to troubleshoot

- Sometimes tempers are getting high and you will need to help.
- With a young child who is about to hurt another child, quickly separate them. Keep the child who is angry with you for a while or find her something different to do until she has calmed down.

- You may have to separate older children until tempers cool. Remember that separating children does not solve their problem. Help them to work out a way to do things differently when they are calmer.
- It is often helpful to get children used to the idea of apologising to each other and saying sorry. They may not want to do this, but being able to say sorry is a very important thing in any relationship.

## Reminders

- **Don't try to treat all your children exactly the same as each other because they are different people at different ages and with different needs.**
- **It is important that your children see you as being reasonable and fair in how you respond.**
- **If children ask whom you love best, tell them that each of them is special to you in their own way and that no one could replace them.**
- **Don't label children.**
- **Teach children to say how they feel with words not actions.**
- **Don't look for someone to blame. Look for ways to do it differently next time.**
- **Children need to know that you understand how they are feeling.**
- **Help children to find other outlets for their feelings through play.**
- **Feeling jealous of a parent's love for other children in the family can be a major cause of stress for a child. To a child, love means time and attention.**
- **It is natural for parents to not always feel the same towards all their children from time to time.**
- **Love can never be shown in exactly the same way for every child but each child needs to feel sure of being loved.**

## Want more information?

Parenting SA – [www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

(parenting and child health information) – [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

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