

Sibling rivalry



Parents often worry about their children fighting with each other but some conflict between children in families is normal. It is part of how they learn to work out differences and get along with others. It is important for parents to be good role models, and to help children work things out fairly until they learn to do this for themselves.

Conflict between children

Arguments between siblings are one of the ways children learn how to be fair, to respect others and to resolve differences. Learning how to argue fairly without hurting anyone is a skill that will help them in future relationships.

Some children fight more than others because of their temperament or because they are still learning the skills they need to get along with others. Children of a similar age tend to fight more, and girls and boys tend to fight around the same amount.

Younger children can use aggression to get what they want. While it is important to teach them other ways to communicate, it helps to not expect too much of them. Younger children only start being able to share from three years onwards.

Children may also fight about your love and compete for your attention. They can feel jealous if you seem to have more time for one child, or to treat one child differently to another. If children feel they are not treated fairly by parents they can sometimes be aggressive toward their siblings. Even adult children can be jealous of their siblings.

Reducing conflict

Parents can reduce conflict by helping each child feel equally loved and valued.

- Try to spend equal time with each child on their own. The things you do with them may be different due to their ages and interests.

- Reduce jealousy by commenting equally on children's achievements, e.g. a piece of art work, a report card. Don't compare children – focus on each child's strengths and skills.
- Allow children to have special things of their own that their siblings don't touch.
- Give each child something small when buying gifts rather than one big thing to share.
- Ensure a child is not always left out of games. If children have friends over, try to have a friend for each child to play with at the same time.
- Teach children to be kind and thoughtful to each other, e.g. making cards or presents for birthdays.
- Make time to have fun as a family.
- Help children find an outlet for their feelings, e.g. active play, sport, music or creative activities.

Rules and routines

There is less to fight over when there are clear, simple family rules and routines that encourage fairness and respect for others.

It helps to:

- let your children help set rules for how people treat each other, e.g. 'We always take turns', 'We never hit people or call them names', 'We say sorry'. Put a copy on the fridge to remind everyone
- agree what will happen if rules are broken and be consistent in how you respond
- be a good role model by following family rules yourself
- have household routines, e.g. who washes the dishes on certain days, where everyone sits for meals.

Having clear family rules about 'how we do things in our family' helps children know what is expected.



When there is conflict

Some parents think it's best to let children work out their own differences but children are not born knowing how to resolve conflict. They need parents to show them how. Teaching them the skills to work things out fairly can reduce fighting in the long term.

Letting children 'fight it out' often means the oldest or strongest child always wins. This can encourage bullying. The other child may learn to just give in all the time.

It is important for parents to help children calm down before trying to resolve conflict. It's hard for anyone to reason when caught up in strong emotions. Help each child name their feelings and let them know you understand how they feel.

When both children are calm you can sit down with them and:

- remind them of family rules about how to treat each other
- let each child give their view of what happened. Resist the urge to say who you think is right or wrong, or focus on blame. It is about letting each child feel heard without you taking sides
- support each child to express themselves to their sibling, saying how they feel and what they would like to see happen. Don't let the other child interrupt
- help children come up with a solution once they have listened to each other.

Often sibling rivalry decreases when children don't feel a parent is taking sides.

When parents assist children to problem-solve in this way it helps them build the skills to do it for themselves. The stronger child learns to listen to others and to not have to win each time. The less powerful child gets better at speaking up for themselves. Both children learn it is their responsibility to help find solutions.

As children get better at working things out fairly, parents can be less involved. Give lots of praise when they do well. Tell them what you like about their behaviour, e.g. 'You both did a good job of working that out fairly'. This encourages the behaviour you want and builds their confidence in sorting things out.

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Once children have the skills to work things out fairly trust them to sort out differences on their own. Only get involved if they are having trouble, if there is bullying or a child is at risk of harm.
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Is it more than sibling rivalry?

Sometimes fighting might be more than sibling rivalry. If an older child or teenager is abusive or violent it can be an attempt to control and have power over others in the home, including parents. It is very important to protect younger or vulnerable children. Contact a counsellor or a youth mental health service for support. Getting help early gives your child the best chance to make a change (see Parent Easy Guides 'Family violence' and 'Violence towards parents').

If there are serious risks to family safety you may need to call the police. Don't do this just to scare or shame your child. It will damage your relationship with them. Parents don't always report the matter to the police due to shame, guilt or fear of being judged. While you may be reluctant to involve police, helping your child learn that violence is not OK is the most loving thing you can do.

Want more information?

Police

Phone 000 in an emergency
Phone 131 444 for police attendance

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100
Advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri for an appointment. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

Youth Mental Health Service

Phone 13 14 65, 24 hours
Supporting young people 16 to 24 years to manage their mental health

HeadSpace National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Phone 1800 650 890, 9am-1am
Help for young people 12 – 25 years and parents
www.headspace.org.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Family violence' and 'Violence towards parents'
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network

For parenting information
www.raisingchildren.net.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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