

From Sibling Rivalry to Sibling Loyalty

by Dianne Reinmuth

Probably *every parent who has had two or more children has wondered at some time how such small bodies can produce such awful shrieks and agonized howls. The volume alone can be intimidating.*

It is a rare parent who knows exactly what to do every time a fight breaks out between siblings. This kind of combativeness—arguing, teasing, squabbling, pushing, or shoving—can become a daily reality for families with more than one child.

Such sibling discord is so normal that several authorities suggest that children who do not bicker, quarrel, and otherwise assert themselves may have much deeper problems than those who do.

It is from this natural give and take that the bonds of loyalty and love between siblings are formed. A healthy rivalry encourages each child to strive to do her best, while an unhealthy struggle damages both children.

There is a powerful difference between this natural jostling for parental attention and the open hostility of a knives-and-brickbats confrontation. When serious injury to the other child is the intention and the result of sibling clashes (whether they are physical or verbal), then the parents need to seek some kind of intervention for the children and guidance for themselves. A family home is no place for abuse, no matter who starts it.

Normal sibling conflicts can wear several different faces. Sometimes the causes are strictly environmental: Is either child hungry? Does one child have wet pants? Has the day been too boringly routine or too hectic for young children? Sometimes the bickering escalates simply because it's "that time of day."

A little extra planning by Mom or Dad can go a long way towards preventing such episodes. Try to give each child a healthy "pick-me-up" (apple, banana, slice of cheese) about four o'clock, show prompt attention to removing wet or tight clothing, take a short walk outdoors to relieve the inside-all-day monotony, or read a quiet story before supper while the unoccupied parent prepares the meal. Try to work with each child's needs rather than against them.

If each child is well-fed, comfortable, and has had some attention from Mom or Dad recently, and still one child makes verbal or physical attacks on the other, the diagnosis may be a case of sibling jealousy. Such jealous feelings stem from a suspicion that somehow one is not getting enough of whatever he wants or needs from the situation.

It is not unkind to teach your children, gently, that life is not going to give them everything they want, every time they want it. Remind them that you love them and you are doing your best to meet the needs of each child, and that each person's needs are different. If they are verbal, ask for a solution from each child and point out the similarities and differences of each one's demands. If one child is too young to speak for herself, verbalize for her saying, "It looks like your brother would like a turn, too, just like you do."

Children need to see how two people can arrive at a compromise. This provides a model for cooperation between siblings later on and demonstrates a good beginning for an effective solution now.

There are several guidelines for preventing the unpleasantness of sibling rivalry:

1. Be firm. Make your limits clear and stand by them. It is important to communicate at whatever level the child can understand. Long, rational explanations are not helpful. Keep it short and to the point. Tell your child what you expect him to do, rather than what he is doing wrong.

2. Try to establish a workable schedule that allows you to give some undivided attention to each child each day. This is a preventive measure. A child who knows she will have you to herself at a set time each day is less likely to pester you or her sibling from the fear that she'll never get any time with you. Talk it up! Tell your child that this time is set aside especially for the two of you to be together because she is so special to you. Remind her that this time together is planned, and let her look forward to it and learn to count on it. Time alone with you is vital to each child as a way of meeting the child's basic need to stay connected to you as she grows up.

3. Look at each child as unique and try to focus on the positive characteristics that you see. This will help prevent "lumping together" quite different personalities into the non-descript title, "the kids." Parents love each child differently and this is normal. And they must not show partiality for one child over another. The effect of feeling preferred creates as much tension and unhappiness for "the favorite" as the discouraging sense of rejection experienced by the non-favored child.

4. Look for things you like about each child and let him know what you see. Try to focus on the child himself and not his achievements. "I get a kick out of the way you love to run!" shows an appreciation of your child that is lacking in "I like to see you win those races." Try to comment on how well he accomplished his goals: "You put a lot of energy into that!" rather than "That's a good job." The latter is an evaluation of his product, not his effort.)

5. Never compare children against each other, as it sabotages the cooperation you are seeking to build in them and breeds the vicious kind of rivalry that may damage their happiness. Instead, encourage each child to find something enjoyable about her sibling(s), and help your children develop ways to share good times together.

6. Get out of your children's fights. You can intervene or ignore as your philosophy dictates, but remember, it's not your battle. It is not a catastrophe if children argue and scream. Try not to get into the fight yourself or bellow and stomp around like the biggest child in the family. If you find yourself yelling over the din, try to make it something helpful, such as, "We don't hit each other in this family!"

7. Give your children your compassion. When two children fight, verbally or physically, they often end up unhappy. If they must be separated, do so with quiet confidence. "I'm sorry you two can't play together without fighting. Now you will have to play separately."

8. Keep in mind that a child can see the difference between words you aim at the "self" ("You bratty kid!") and those that merely describe his actions ("You have taken the toy from your sister again.") Teach your children to cooperate and help them communicate their

needs to each other and you will have a good start towards cementing that life-long bond of sibling loyalty.

Learning to turn a very natural sibling rivalry into a strong sense of loyalty takes effort, imagination, perseverance, and a confident frame of mind. Your children are learning a toughness and resiliency that will stand them in good stead all the rest of their lives. Remember that having a sibling can enrich each child's life in some surprising ways!

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