



family
project

Tips to Manage Sibling Rivalry at Home

activity sheet

Most parents will be familiar with the sound of siblings fighting, bickering and squabbling; it often fills us with dread and we all want nothing more than for our kids to please just get along!

One of the greatest hopes many parents have is for their children to be friends. Beyond not enjoying the sound of screaming & bickering on a day-to-day basis many parents share a deeper hope that the humans they're raising will - one day be friends who will be there for each other.

For many parents, children not getting along triggers worry deep in us that they may never get along. It can lead to a situation where we react in a knee-jerk, and sometimes loud manner – we may yell and punish the offending child and often they'll yell back.

The way we react to siblings fighting matters. Here are our top five tips for changing the way we respond to fighting.

Tip 1: Welcome conflict – and step out of the middle.

Conflict is how our children learn about power and negotiation. It's healthy.

Often we are just too involved and reactive. When we overreact the one thing we guarantee is that they will do it again. Because kids seek out our reactions whether they are positive or negative – so yelling will lead to more of the same.

Next time your children come running to you with a conflict try saying something like this: "Wow it sounds like you guys have a big problem. I wonder how you can solve it?"

Next time you hear your kids tussling over a toy, try to sit back and watch, ready to step in but willing to see how they go sorting it out themselves until really needed. Kids really can be very good at sorting out conflicts when they stop looking for us to step in.

The less we step in as a habit the less our kids request our involvement in their fights.

**TIP 2: Be a commentator, not a referee**

When siblings need more support - the trick is being able to be a commentator (who sets a few ground rules) rather than a referee. When we are able to have some basic rules (for example, we don't hit or hurt and we don't snatch) our kids are free to get into healthy, noisy conflicts as long as they don't break the ground rules. This makes our role clearer: when the ground rules get broken we need to step in to set a boundary. If a rule is being broken we must set a clear boundary to stop it. "I can't let you hit."

Outside of a ground rule being broken, our role as a commentator is simply naming what we see.

"Oh wow, you both want the yellow block, but we only have one.... I wonder what you guys are going to do?" These observations can engage even the most stubborn brick builder to come up with a solution.

"She gets more than me every time," can be met with "You feel like your sister is always getting more than you are and that's upsetting you." Commentate without the judgement and resist the urge to jump in and solve the problem.

TIP 3: Know that it nearly always takes two to tango

Sometimes it can look like one of your kids is targeting the other, however coming in to assist your kids with conflict in a more neutral way can really help to get a sense of how it nearly always takes two to tango in a conflict.

When we can be more neutral and wonder out loud about what went wrong it allows both kids to feel seen and heard. This can help them learn how to avoid conflict in the future.

TIP 4: Start with connection.

Connection in these moments often requires is to get in close and perhaps provide support in the form of a hug to both kids.

It means tuning in to why things went wrong and being there with your kids as they navigate their feelings.

TIP 5: Welcome the feelings.

We don't like it when our kids are angry, jealous or sad. And when these emotions are targeted at another child of ours it is a really hard situation for us as parents to accept. The way our own parents handled sibling struggles and feelings in our family of origin will also play a role in our own reactions in these situations.