

Understanding Sibling Relationships

Any household with more than one child, is familiar with the sounds of sibling rivalry. Rivalry can range from the “who-gets-the-biggest-piece” arguments to free-for-all brawls in some families. Living with someone 24 hours a day puts a strain on any relationship, including sibling relationships. Some rivalry, jealousy and squabbling between siblings is normal, but knowing this doesn’t make it any easier on the parents who have to experience it on a daily basis.

The Good News About Sibling Rivalry

Does anything good come out of sibling rivalry? Actually, yes! Experts agree that squabbling between brothers and sisters teaches them how to make their own rules. They also learn how to balance the competition and the rituals of making up. A certain amount of rivalry is good and can provide experiences for children to learn relationship skills, and learn to be part of a social network. A child learns you must give in order to get, which isn’t easy, but it is necessary for healthy adult living. Early family life is the best time to learn these lessons.

Sibling rivalry has existed forever, it is the subject of many mythological and biblical stories and wars have even been fought between brothers trying to win kingdoms. Understanding the reasons for this rivalry may help to relieve parents’ anxieties so they can minimize harmful rivalry. Accepting the fact that parents cannot eliminate all rivalry between siblings will, hopefully, make the job a little easier.

Influences That Encourage Rivalry

Research indicates the existence of many subtle influences in sibling relationships, such as the state of the parent’s relationships with their own brothers and sisters, the state of the parents’ own relationship with each other, birth order, age spacing and gender.

Though most put it behind them, an estimated 20% of adults have never “mended fences” with their brothers and sisters. Half of that number are apathetic, unattached, or uncaring towards their siblings; the other 10% are openly hostile.

Competition

The arrival of the second child is often difficult for the older child because he’s used to having his parents exclusively to himself. Research shows that the adjustment to a new baby is much easier on the first-born if he or she has experiences and friendships outside the home, such as day care, school or play dates. A first-born may take his anger out on his mother since she is the one that brought “that baby” home. Each child wants the exclusive love of his or her parents. So rivalry between siblings often centers around a parent’s affection. If parents can make each child feel special, the child in turn can appreciate his or her brother or sister without feeling threatened. Feeling special means having the unique, special qualities in each of us appreciate.

Conflict

Arguments between siblings are often substitutes for anger directed elsewhere - - it’s a way to blow off steam. When something goes wrong at school or with a friend, brothers and sisters are easy targets, because they’re together most often.

Favoritism

Parents may contribute to sibling rivalry when they play favorites, turning their home into a competitive arena by comparing their children. Even the most conscientious parents may not be aware they are favoring one child. What’s most important is the perceived favoring each child feels.

Boredom and Attention

Fighting gives children something to do - - it’s a way to battle boredom. It’s even more fun when Mom or Dad join the battle by trying to break it up or by taking sides! Keeping your children busy and staying out of their conflicts as much as possible is a good place to start if you want to reduce rivalry in your home.

Since it’s not possible to make anyone stop having feelings like hate, anger, or the need to win, parents may want to acknowledge that rivalry between brothers and sisters is going to exist and, although we can’t eliminate it completely, we can keep it minimized to a bearable level.

Tips to Help Reduce Sibling Rivalry

1. **Discourage tattling.** Don't reward habitual tattling about relatively unimportant matters. Teach your child "good telling" and "bad telling"; the difference is one of degree. Habitual tattling is only earning a brother's or sister's undying hatred and not really gaining the love he wants from you.

2. **Actively foster bonding.** Create "everybody wins" situations by encouraging an older child to read to a young child, let them plan a surprise party for a sibling, or help make a special gift for a brother or sister. Statements from time to time to each child may also foster a special bond, such as; "Your little sister wants to be just like you, she loves you so much" or "Look how big brother is helping you with your shoes, he cares for you a lot." Let each child "overhear" you talking to the others about the good things they do for each other, too.

3. **Keep your children busy.** Bored children get into each other's hair - - and yours! Fill their free-time and suggest activities so they don't spend all their time annoying each other just to have something to do.

4. **Encourage separate time.** Children need time alone for one-on-one activities with each parent. Spend time alone each day with each child. Separate children when grocery shopping, bathing, taking walks, etc. Siblings won't always have to be competing for your attention and often good conversation between parents and child is nurtured.

5. **Let your older child be a child, not an adult.** Often, we put too much responsibility on our older children simply because they have been around longer. Telling an older child he should "know better" or that he needs to set a better example may cause resentment.

6. **Allow them to settle their own disputes.** Children need to learn to problem-solve and the best way to learn is with siblings. Encourage children to talk it over with each other. You may have to put words in their mouths until they learn conflict-resolution skills. "You both want to play with the same toy at the same time, how can you work this out?" Try not to take sides.

7. **Avoid labeling children.** Parents hang tags on their children by saying "he's the worrier" or "she's the family clown". Labeling can be risky because children take them seriously and they may only help to reinforce a low self-concept. Labels are a form of comparing children.

8. **Give rewards and praise for good behavior.** When the fighting fades (even if only temporarily), be

sure your children know you've noticed. Children really do want to please adults and should be told when they have done well.

9. **Ignore some behaviors.** Used as an effective discipline technique, ignoring some behavior is saying to your children that you refuse to reward their behavior with your attention. "If you don't see blood, don't get involved" may be a little extreme, but be selective when intervening. Often, children are literally fighting for your attention.

10. **Avoid comparisons of children.** It isn't fair to compare one child's performance and behavior with another's. Each is at a different age, physically and mentally and each has a unique mix of talents, abilities, and inadequacies. Avoid saying things such as: "Your brother isn't a grump in the morning, why are you?" or "Why can't you get A's like your sister?" Accept each child as an individual.

11. **Hear both sides of the story when you do intervene.** Every child needs to feel his parents are fair and reasonable in enforcing rules and discipline. Make every effort to find out "what's going on" before accusing. We often quickly blame the older child when it's often the younger one instigating the problem.

12. **Be sure each child has his own space.** We all need a place to retreat to for personal time. This might be a corner of a room where other family members are excluded, a backyard playhouse, a room of his own, or a quiet bubble bath in the evening. It's also important that each child is allowed special possessions that he or she is not "forced" to share with anyone.

Diana Converse, M.S. Family Life Educator
University of Florida Extension/Hillsborough County
5339 S. County Rd. 579, Seffner, FL 33584
(813) 744-5519 x. 140

Hillsborough County Extension is a cooperative service of the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners and the University of Florida
The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an Equal Employment Opportunity - Affirmative Action Employer authorized to provide research, educational

information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap or national origin.
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION IN AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS,
STATE OF FLORIDA, IFAS, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, AND BOARDS OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COOPERATING.