



YOUR SIBLING RIVALRY ACTION PLAN

Squabbling is normal among siblings, but when the fighting starts, parents may need a helping hand. Here, we speak to experts for solutions

If you have children, chances are most days you feel more like a referee than a parent. Endless fights over who gets what and who gets it first can test your patience, as can the cries of “It’s not fair!” and “You love her more than me”. Frustration aside, it’s also heartbreaking to witness your children abuse each other verbally or physically.

So what do you do when your children seem more intent on fighting than getting along? Are you unwittingly making their squabbles worse? Here, parenting experts give their advice on how to deal with the conflicts.

BEHIND The Conflict

“Jealousy, competition and having to share resources are the main reasons behind sibling rivalry,” says Melbourne-based child psychologist Dr Emma Little. “Most kids do love their brothers or sisters, but they are also fierce

competitors for parental time, attention and resources. Research shows that siblings under the age of five can fight as often as once every six to 10 minutes, so around 50 times a day.”

It doesn’t stop when your children start school; the rivalry may actually become more problematic with age, says Dr Little. “It is not necessarily something children ‘grow out of’. In fact, interactions between adolescent siblings can be even more volatile because they may feel like there is more competition.”

Dr Lim Boon Leng, Consultant Psychiatrist from Dr BL Lim Centre for Psychological Wellness, says that while sibling rivalry starts to become obvious around the age of three, it usually peaks during adolescence.

“At around three years old, children start to have a better grasp of social rules and the family dynamics. They also start to demand for attention and complain about their siblings,” he explains. “By the time they reach adolescence,

they develop more sophisticated means of fighting, and sibling rivalry escalates.”

The Siblings AT RISK

There are certain factors that can make any rivalry more pronounced. “The closer in age siblings are, the more they’ll fight,” says Dr Little, with a gap of one to three years being the most likely to cause problems.

“It happens because their comparison point is closer,” says Dr Veronica Harris, a Sydney-based clinical psychologist. “They’re more likely to be treated the same by their parents so there’s more opportunity for competition.”

“However, I’ve seen some pretty intense conflict between siblings with a big age gap,” Dr Harris continues. “Teen siblings can feel like the pre-teen is having an easier time or feel annoyed by the pre-teen who constantly wants to be involved in whatever they do.”

Conflict is also more common between same sex siblings. “The more alike children are, the worse sibling rivalry can be,” explains Dr Lim. “Children with similar characteristics have a need to stand out. This makes the competition and the need to win even greater.”

It’s not all bad news, though. “Past studies have indicated that same sex sibling relationships show more closeness, connection and companionship,” says Dr Harris.

STEPPING In

So what does a parent do in order to keep the peace? The first thing to remember is that all



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this arguing is teaching your children important skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation and problem solving. “If they sort out ways to share or compromise, then out in the real world they will have strategies to use when dealing with difficult people or situations,” says Dr Little.

But when does sibling rivalry change from being a normal part of growing up to something to worry about? “Parents have to keep watch and make sure that sibling rivalry does not turn into abuse. Abuse may involve repeated acts of physical violence or emotional bullying. Physical violence may include hitting, punching or even choking, and emotion abuse can include ridiculing, provoking, intimidating and annoying,” stresses Dr Lim.

A Unified FAMILY

Serious squabbling can also have far more serious consequences for the family. “I’ve seen sibling fighting that has led to total family dysfunction, where parents are stressed, fed up and having their own mental health compromised,” she adds. “There are some siblings that just can’t get past the conflict, and sever all ties as adults. This goes to show how critical it is for parents to get on top of sibling conflict at an early age.”

So how do you help your kids to get along better? You start by not comparing them. “It’s so easy to fall into the trap of saying things like, ‘Why can’t you be as tidy as your sister?’ or ‘Why can’t you be like your brother and just do what I ask?’” says Dr Little. “But when we do this, our children start to feel resentful of their sibling and take their frustration out on them.”

Dr Lim says it’s also crucial to treat your children equivalently, not equally. “Children cannot be treated equally due to factors such as age, sex and personality. Children have different needs and parents need to individualise how they treat each child. It is better for parents to accept that they can never be fair and for them to educate their children that the children’s perceived unfairness is simply due to individualised needs,” shares Dr Lim.

Also, don’t overlook external issues if one sibling is fighting excessively with another, says Dr Harris. “They may be unsettled at school, have fallen out with their friends, are being bullied or struggling academically, and that stress is coming out at home.”

Finally, a family environment that’s positive, peaceful and unified can make a big difference. “Children need to feel that they are valued and loved,” adds Dr Harris. “Having a warm relationship with all your children without favouritism will see them get on better with each other.” **W**

HELPFUL STRATEGIES

More expert tips on curbing sibling rivalry

1 Give individual time and attention.

Each child should get a little one-on-one time with both their parents regularly. This should be a time where they get to lead you in playing, talking or doing something special.

2 Build a strong, supportive family.

When the atmosphere at home is positive, sibling rivalry is less likely. Plan to do fun things together and encourage a sense of unity.

3 Set ground rules and boundaries.

Make sure kids know that you will not tolerate them behaving badly or abusive towards each other.

4 Support their individuality.

When siblings have their own interests or skills they are likely to feel more comfortable and confident in their own skin.

5 Coach your children rather than referee their fights.

Help them to find their own solutions to problems that meet both their needs.

6 Focus on the positive and cooperative behaviour when you see it.

If they are getting along well, make sure they know you noticed and encourage or commend them openly.

