



Understanding Sibling Rivalry

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

“Mommy, mommy! Billy took my toy,” screams Billy’s younger sister.

“But Brandy got the front seat last time,” her sister Pam argues with arms folded. “It’s my turn to sit in the front.”

“I refuse to go to the movies with Toni,” exclaims her brother. “She’s a big, fat pig!”

These are all examples of sibling arguments. Are they also examples of sibling rivalry? Not if they’re isolated incidents that happen only occasionally. But if the arguments between siblings are ongoing and frequent, then we can describe the pattern as “sibling rivalry.”

When rivalry is present between siblings, their conflicts are typically NOT solved during the arguments. That means that they’re not fighting about the right issue. They’re not fighting about who sits up front in the van. They’re fighting about something else.

When rivalry is present, here are the four common issues that kids are really fighting about:

1. Getting a parent’s attention. This is the most common issue that spurs sibling fighting.
2. Jealousy. One sibling may be jealous of the other (what the other one has, how the other one looks, or how well the other one does in school).
3. Teasing. Sibling fighting may take the form of teasing. By doing this, they test the limits of what’s socially acceptable. In the family, kids can test what they can say by judging what kind of pain it causes. Though children may learn important lessons about how to interact with other people, there are other ways to learn that are less hurtful.
4. Expressing competition. We live in a competitive society and sibling rivalry is an extension of that. It’s a way for kids to compete with each other and learn how to manage their own competitive behavior.

What Can Parents Do?

Here’s a list of helpful interventions that parents can use to reduce or stop sibling rivalry:

- Don’t pay attention to the fight; stay out of it. If they are fighting for your attention and you don’t get involved, they will learn other, hopefully better ways to get your attention.
- Don’t take sides, don’t be the judge. When they’re fighting, tell the kids, “I want you two to work this out,” and walk away. Don’t get involved in the fight.
- Offer problem-solving strategies when the children are not fighting. It may be necessary to work with each child individually, but be really careful that you are not inadvertently playing into the rivalry by giving the desired attention. Offer support without saying whether the child is right or wrong. Ask what the child thinks the fight was about and how he or she might avoid this kind of fight in the future.
- Avoid favoritism. Some researchers believe that perceived favoritism is the greatest cause of sibling rivalry. So avoiding it helps immensely. This can be challenging since parents may favor certain traits in children over other traits. That means, children who have the favored traits become favored. Hint #1: Pay attention to each child and determine what kind of attention is needed. Consider that children are different and need different things at different times. An exact minute for minute accounting of your attention is not essential. Sometimes a child may require some extra time. Hint #2: Give each child his or

her own special time with you. During this time, make sure no one else is around to compete for your attention.

- Make clear that ongoing conflict is unacceptable. When the fighting has stopped, say something to the rivals like, “I’m unhappy with the present level of fighting and I want you two to find a way to work this out.” If a fight is just beginning, you may give the rivals a group goal so they can work together for a positive outcome.
- Remain positive. By finding something positive about each of your children on an ongoing basis, you’ll reduce the level of sibling rivalry.
- Teach empathy. Empathy is the opposite of sibling rivalry. The more sensitive siblings are to each other’s emotions, the less they’ll challenge each other as rivals. (See my recent column on empathy for more ideas.)
- Know when to intervene. Sibling rivalry can develop into abuse if one sibling regularly victimizes the other. If you follow all of the above, this probably will not happen. But if you’re still struggling with this situation, be alert. Check to see if someone is really getting hurt and who’s too helpless to stop the abuser. The abuse can be physical, emotional, or sexual. If it’s going on, your response must be prompt and significant. This must not be allowed. If you can’t stop the abuser yourself, seek outside help—a counselor, a friend of family member, or the police or other authorities if you can’t stop it any other way.

Sibling rivalry is common in families. It occurs especially in families where kids are close in age. It challenges parents to find solutions, yet resolution can make everyone stronger. I recommend the solutions listed above. Try them. I’m sure you’ll find they can help.

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