

Managing Sibling Rivalry: Tips for Parents



Highlights

Sibling rivalry is common in most families and has many causes. Children need help developing skills to resolve conflicts fairly. It's important to establish clear family rules and intervene before fights escalate. Age and temperament influence the intensity of sibling rivalry.

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What is sibling rivalry?

Sibling rivalry refers to tension between siblings, often seen through competition for attention or possessions. It can manifest as teasing, arguing, or even tattling. While uncomfortable, sibling rivalry is a natural way for children to learn fairness and conflict resolution.

Some children argue more frequently due to their personality or because they are still learning how to interact with others. It's a typical part of growing up, helping children develop respect for one another.

Age and fighting

The way children fight depends on their age and stage of development. Younger children, especially those under 2, tend to fight over toys or turns. They lack reasoning skills, so their conflict resolution is often physical, such as pushing or biting.

While some level of conflict is normal, it becomes problematic when the fighting escalates.

Why do children fight?

Children's fights can stem from different perspectives, jealousy, or a desire for attention. Younger children may lack the communication skills to resolve issues and may fight to provoke a reaction. They may also compete for their parents' time and attention.

Toddlers and a new baby

When a new baby arrives, it can be challenging for a toddler, who may not understand their feelings of jealousy or how to handle them. They might regress in behavior, such as starting to use a bottle again or showing attention-seeking actions during breastfeeding. This can disrupt family life and lead to arguments or even physical aggression between siblings.

Tips to manage sibling rivalry

What you do when the children aren't fighting is as important as how you handle conflicts. Try to:

Teach your children to manage angry feelings.

Model healthy relationships and social skills.

Encourage positive problem-solving.

Stay calm when dealing with conflicts.

Setting rules

Every child needs to feel loved, but it's important to acknowledge that their needs differ. Children of different ages and personalities require different rules and boundaries. They should learn to share but also have personal space and belongings.

Clear and simple rules are essential. Remind children of these rules during disagreements, and focus on positive language. For instance, say, "we use kind words" instead of "no mean words."

Praise children when they follow rules or exhibit good behavior.

What to do when there is conflict

Stop fights before emotions escalate. Calmly inform older children that discussions will happen later when everyone is calm.

Treat each child fairly without comparing them negatively. Investigate the cause of the fight and develop a plan to address it, using the family rules.

Keeping toddlers involved

Engage toddlers in family activities by assigning them small tasks, like choosing clothes for the baby. Even if they refuse, avoid forcing them unless necessary.

Spending one-on-one time with toddlers helps them feel valued and special.

Is it more than sibling rivalry?

If conflicts turn aggressive or frequent, seek help. If children intimidate, bully, or physically harm each other, it's important to stop the behavior immediately.

Looking after yourself

If you feel overwhelmed, seek support from family, friends, or a doctor to help manage the situation.

Tools and Assistance

Parenting support is available through various helplines for guidance and advice.

Consider consulting a maternal child health nurse for additional support in managing sibling rivalry.