Sibling Rivalry Is Driving Me Crazy!

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My kids are constantly annoying each other. I am sick of the bickering and teasing. Is there any way to prevent the fighting?

Learning to get along is a skill that, like any other, needs to be developed. Children start out in life as if they are the center of the universe, driven by the immediacy of their wants, needs, urges, and impulses. As they mature, they slowly acquire the ability to recognize that other people's feelings matter as much to them as theirs do to themselves — if all goes well. But this process takes time. As parents, we need to be patient as we help our children learn how to resolve conflict without hurting others. Here are some things to keep in mind:

• **Be realistic.** It takes effort to resist pinching little sister if she's eaten the last cookie. It takes mental resolve to avoid "accidentally" knocking down big

brother's Lego creation when he was teasing you a few minutes earlier. When children lash out at siblings it is often the result of overpowering urges. Remember those times when you knew you shouldn't have a second piece of cake but you couldn't resist? Haven't there been times when you were meant to work on your taxes but instead found yourself watching three more episodes of *Orange is the New Black?* Even adults don't always do what they know they should. Just because your kids intellectually understand that they shouldn't tease or hit doesn't mean they will always be able to resist the temptation to do so, especially when they're tired, hurt, frustrated, or hungry.

• **Steer clear of shame.** Avoid saying things like, *"What's the matter with you? You know you aren't allowed to pinch your brother?"* or *"Why can't you be nice?"* Children want to please us; they just don't always have the ability to manage those impulses. If you shame your children for being less mature than you think they should be, you'll do nothing to advance your cause. In fact, you may drive them to project their hurt even more onto their siblings.

• **Make sure they're getting one on one time with you.** I often find that siblings who are constantly at each other's throats have discovered that it is a guaranteed method for getting a big dose of a parent's attention—even if it is negative!

• **Help them develop self-awareness.** The next time your kids are bickering, pretend you're a reporter. Describe what's going on without judging or criticizing. *"It looks like Ella badly wants a turn with the red crayon." "Sammy has been waiting a long time for a turn on the swing and Frankie doesn't seem to want to get off."* Simply saying, "Use your words" isn't very useful. By narrating what's happening when there's conflict or tension between your kids they'll get better at talking about what's frustrating them and asking for what they need instead of using force.

Sibling relationships are one of the best environments for developing empathy, self-advocacy, and restraint. By meeting our children where they

are and teaching them to ask for what they need, over time they will internalize your lessons. Don't give up! but do find some grown up time for yourself if you need it!

Susan Stiffelman is the author of [Parenting Without Power Struggles: Raising Joyful, Resilient Kids While Staying Cool, Calm and Connected](#) *and the brand new* [Parenting with Presence: Practices for Raising Conscious, Confident, Caring Kids (An Eckhart Tolle Edition)](#). *She is a family therapist, parent coach and internationally recognized speaker on all subjects related to children, teens and parenting.*

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Do you have a question for the Parent Coach? Send it to askparentcoach@gmail.com and you could be featured in an upcoming blog post.

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