

Let's Turn Sibling Conflicts into Growth Opportunities

By Joe DeProspero

Our instinct may be to separate our kids when they get into spats, but maybe we should be viewing these fights as an opportunity to help them develop some much-needed life skills.



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When our children fight with one another, our instinct usually is to diffuse the situation and separate them until they calm down, apologize, or a combination of the two. But what if instead of separation, we encouraged communication, resolution, a more thorough understanding of someone else's perspective? It can yield results that help mold our children into more fair and balanced adults.

Before I go any further, I want to be clear that I completely realize this isn't always realistic. We can't turn every single argument our kids have into this overarching lesson on conflict resolution and communication. Things get in the way of that. Like our own exhaustion. Or the knowledge that it's 9:00 p.m. and the top priority is merely to get them horizontal and asleep to [avoid a cranky, whiny mess in the morning](#).

As a father of three, I'm occasionally found floundering in those proverbial treacherous waters where my two older children are swinging at each other's faces and I'm resigned to damage control. And that's the stance I believe most of us take when our children are at each other's throats—let me diffuse the situation as quickly and amicably as possible, so I can move on to the next thing (whether that's work, dinner, bedtime, etc.). But lately I've been looking at this chaos through a different lens. Could the turmoil that exists among siblings actually result in something...positive?

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"Children can benefit from learning how to resolve conflicts as long as it is in their developmentally appropriate range," says Michael Zito, Ph.D., a psychologist who specializes in clinical and sports psychology. "For example, a 6-year-old may not have the capability of [dealing with a chronic bully](#), but could learn to negotiate sharing conflicts with a sibling."

For most of us, that's where the vast majority of conflict manifests—at home amongst brothers and sisters. If what Dr. Zito says is accurate, we'd all have a golden opportunity to teach conflict resolution practically every day. And there would be no shortage of chances to test it out.

Regarding how best to implement this strategy, Dr. Zito suggests, "Parents can guide their children through conflict management by using facilitative questioning. This means the parent can ask questions to promote conflict resolution."

The general idea is to divert the child's attention away from his own anger and redirect it toward examining the root of that anger, while also developing a deeper understanding of his current adversary's perspective. So, in a way, it seems like "speed therapy," minus the copay and leather sofa.

I've personally tried this in my own house. My two sons (ages 5 and 7) were used to being yelled at and promptly sent to their rooms whenever they went

at each other. So, when I would try to reason with them, they'd simply take that opportunity to take a few more swings at each other. But after a few failed attempts, they started to notice something—I wasn't screaming at them and sending them to their rooms. I was asking them questions. Eventually, they started answering them, albeit in a whiny, "but Dad!" type of way. And they started to realize that every scuffle wasn't going to result in separation. They started to understand that introspection was a valuable thing. Okay, they aren't *that* advanced, but they certainly started to view conflict as something other than the beginning of the silent treatment.

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I asked questions that forced them to consider how the other might feel. "Would you like it if someone knocked down your Lego tower?" But I also asked questions that were a bit more self-serving. "Honey, if you want your brother to share his new water gun, don't you think you ought to be nicer to him?" That's a strategy I like to call "dangling the incentive." If it works, it works. Right?

While I'd like to report that this tactic has transformed my household into a utopian paradise, that simply isn't the case. My kids, like any, get into [irrational, silly fights](#) about things like which boy got to pick the last TV show, who is sitting on the wrong couch, or who stared at who for too many seconds. But when I was a kid, practically every scuffle with my sister resulted in being sent to our rooms until we apologized for whatever hell we'd raised. Half the time I didn't truly understand what I was apologizing for. I just understood it as my ticket to freedom. My sister and I were never encouraged to talk through the issue, but rather stay away from each other until our tempers cooled. It might explain to this day why I tend to flee from conflict and avoid confrontation at all costs.

Dr. Zito believes "conflict is an opportunity to develop life skills." And that's really what this is about. We want to teach our children that, while conflict is inevitable, it can yield something other than just hurt feelings. It can help

build a foundation for a life that will involve countless opportunities to practice conflict resolution skills. And I'm not saying I think every juvenile spat should result in a 45-minute sit-down; but if we encourage children to talk through issues maturely, we have a much greater shot at yielding level-headed, reasonable adults instead of the type who get into Twitter wars and embarrassing Black Friday battles for the last iPad.

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