

# When Siblings Engage in Combat

Part of the [Sibling Rivalry Series](#)



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In some families the nonstop bickering and pummeling that goes on between children is enough to cause mothers and fathers to want to turn in their resignation from parenthood. And it's particularly exasperating when the parents have not modeled antagonistic or harsh behavior. *Where does all this awful hostility come from? Where did we go wrong?*

A number of factors may contribute to sibling combat. Recognizing them and working to reduce their impact can go a long way toward maintaining peace in your home.

## **Desire for parental attention**

If there is more than one child in the nest there may be some serious concerns about (and competition for) a parent's attention. Ironically, in some cases children may instigate a fight merely to get an adult involved with them — even when the consequences are unpleasant.

But even if the attention-seeking behavior is annoying, the basic questions

are the same: *Who cares about me? Am I significant to anyone? Does what I think or do really matter?*

To avoid endless guilt, acknowledge that you can't be all things to one child, let alone many. Nevertheless, amid all the basic responsibilities of daily living, maintaining a home, generating income, and pursuing church, educational, or community projects, **some time and energy must be available for individual attention to each child on a regular basis.**

If your schedule is particularly busy, set a regular "date" with each child, during which he will have your **undivided attention**. It doesn't need to be elaborate; a walk in the park or an outing for an ice-cream cone can be a memorable occasion.

## **Comparisons**

When two children first meet, comparisons are immediate and normal: Who is older, bigger, and faster? What toys does one have that the other doesn't? These questions may be minor points of interest that do not affect a budding friendship, or they may prove to be a source of major conflict.

Within the close quarters of a family, comparisons between children will be daily and may become a source of ongoing friction. Parents of more than one child will regularly have to recognize and praise each child's unique skills, strengths, and accomplishments — without implying that one sibling is somehow better than another.

Whatever you do, **avoid negative comparisons** such as "Why can't you throw a ball like your brother?" or "You'll go a lot farther in life if you buckle down to your schoolwork like your sister does!" These kinds of comments are virtually guaranteed to stir resentment.

## **Invasion of privacy**

No child appreciates having his possessions pawed through, broken, strewn

on the floor, or taken to places unknown. **Help an older child safeguard his belongings** when there is a toddler on the loose, perhaps by:

- providing closet or shelf space for him that is inaccessible to the younger child
- keeping the older child's bedroom door closed
- limiting the range of the toddler's explorations

Caution your children about becoming overly attached to and emotional about their possessions. But also instill in them a healthy respect for the possessions of others, especially within your own home.

## **Oppression**

Older children can be merciless in their physical and emotional torment of younger siblings, and parents must be prepared to intervene when this type of behavior is going on.

But sometimes younger children can harass and irritate older siblings, and they should not be given free rein to do so simply because they are smaller.

## **Injustice**

"He did it!" and "She started it!" are common "not guilty" pleas of siblings who are asked to account for a mess, a broken toy (or window), or a fight. Many times you will have to sort out who did what to whom, and at times you will need the wisdom of Solomon to dispense justice in the face of conflicting testimony or inconclusive evidence.

While children may fervently seek to escape punishment, they care desperately about fairness. **Don't play favorites.** The fact that one child is normally more compliant than another doesn't mean that he isn't capable of instigating wrongdoing.

In addition to your efforts to minimize these hot spots for sibling rivalry, here

are a few more general principles to keep in mind:

- **Don't get pulled into every conflict.** Sometimes children will start an uproar in a misguided attempt to gain adult attention. Ignoring their efforts will reduce the odds of a repeat performance. Even if that isn't their motivation, in some situations it's reasonable to give children a chance to sort out their own conflicts.
- **Don't let conflicts get out of hand.** If the children are not arriving at an appropriate solution, if someone is being bullied, or if insults (or fists) are flying, call a time-out for tempers to cool down.
- **Repeatedly teach the principle of mutual respect and its implications.** Just as marital conflicts must be settled within a framework of mutual respect, so also must disagreements between children. This is the basis for curbing insults and not allowing arguments to escalate into physical combat.
- **Administer disciplinary measures privately.** The embarrassment of being disciplined in front of other people — especially other children who may secretly take pleasure in watching the punishment — is both painful and counterproductive and more likely to lead to resentment than improved behavior.
- **Discourage tattling.** If one child tells you about the misdeeds of another, the second child's behavior must be dealt with, assuming that the story is true.

But if the first child seems smug or gleeful while reporting to you what his sibling did, or if he appears to gloat over the other child's discipline, he needs to be reprimanded too. The issue isn't that he reported the wrongdoing; at times such information may prevent an accident or injury. What you want to discourage is the attitude of tattling that derives satisfaction or pleasure from another's "crime and punishment."

- **Remember that "this too will surely pass."** It is often difficult to believe that children who have squabbled so intensely for so many years can actually have civilized relationships later in life. Yet in the vast

majority of cases, a child's passage into adolescence and adulthood ends sibling warfare and replaces it with pleasant camaraderie, deepening friendship, and (most surprisingly) fervent loyalty.