

# Reducing Sibling Rivalry



Arguing between brothers and sisters is normal and occurs in most families. Conflict is a normal part of life. How it is resolved is what makes the difference.

Children need us to acknowledge their feelings, and to value their unique qualities. By being given opportunities and support to resolve their own conflicts they learn how to get along with others.

## Acknowledge Feelings

Instead of dismissing negative feelings about a sibling, acknowledge the feelings.

*Insisting upon good feelings between children leads to bad feelings.*

*Allowing for bad feelings between children leads to good feelings.*

When a child is upset with a brother or sister:

- Put the feeling into words - "You sound furious!"
- Express what the child might wish - "You wish he'd ask before using your things"
- Encourage symbolic or creative expression "How would you feel about making a Private Property sign and hanging it on your cupboard door?", or "No hurting your sister. You can show me your feelings with your doll". As the child does various things, we can reflect their feelings. Then "I'm glad you showed me. If you ever feel that way again, be sure to come and tell me".

The way we reflect feelings needs to enable a child to move on. Instead of:

"I can hear that you hate your brother"

"Yes I hate him"

"Boy, you really hate him.."

Try:

"I can hear how angry you are with your brother"

"Something he did really infuriated you"

"Would you like to tell me more about it"

## Aggressive Behaviour

Be permissive with feelings but not action. Stop hurtful behaviour and show how angry feelings can be discharged safely.

"Hold it! People are not for hurting"

"Tell him with words how angry you are. Tell him 'I don't want my skates used without my permission'".

## Don't Compare

We can increase competitive feelings by comparing children with each other.

Resist the urge to compare one child unfavourably to another - "Why can't you hang up your clothes like your brother?"

Speak to the child only about the behaviour that displeases you.

Describe what you see

"I see a brand new jacket on the floor."

or

Describe what you feel

"That bothers me."

or

Describe what needs to be done

"This jacket belongs in the closet."

Instead of comparing one child favourably to another speak only about the behaviour. Rather than "You are so much neater than your brother."

"I see you hung up your jacket."

or

"I appreciate that. I like seeing our hallway looking neat."

## Children don't need to be treated equally. They need to be treated uniquely.

It is exhausting and in fact impossible to dish out hugs, grapes, time uniformly.

Instead of giving equal amounts - "Here now, you have just as many grapes as your sister."

Give according to individual need - "Do you want a few grapes or a big bunch?"

Instead of showing equal love - "I love you the same as your sister."

Show the child he or she is loved uniquely -

"You are the only 'you' in the whole wide world. No one could ever take your place."

Instead of giving equal time - "After I've spent ten minutes with your sister, I'll spend ten minutes with you."

Give time according to need - "I know I'm spending a lot of time going over your sister's homework. It's important to her. As soon as I'm finished, I want to hear what is important to you."

## Free children from roles

Roles are assigned to children for various reasons. Parents, siblings and children themselves ascribe the roles. Children then live up to these expectations. "If I'm accused of being wild then I may as well be." The role often reinforces behaviour we don't want to persist, for example, "she is the messy one".

When one child stakes out an area as his/her special area of competence, we need to guard against excluding other children in the family from that area. For example, the child whose piano lessons were discontinued despite her enjoyment, because her sister played better. Children can also abandon an area of competence because a sibling is successful in that area or the qualities are not valued by the family.

Children do have different personalities, however, **think of them and treat them differently and they behave differently.**

- Instead of thinking of a child as lazy, we can see a child who is unmotivated and needs someone to believe he can work hard
- Instead of labelling a child clumsy, we can see a child who needs to have her movement accepted and some opportunities provided to learn balance and coordination.
- Instead of a victim, we can see a boy who needs to learn how to protect himself and demand respect.

Our communication influences how children perceive themselves:

Instead of "Johnny did you hide your brother's ball? Why are you always so mean?"  
You can describe what is happening "Your brother wants his ball back".

When a child defines themselves "I'm not creative, my sister is the creative one".  
You can present a different picture "You're also capable of being creative, you made your last school project very interesting".

When a sibling defines the role "Johnny's mean. He won't lend me his sticky tape".  
You can suggest a different attitude "Try asking him differently. You may be surprised how generous he can be".

## How to handle fighting

Being arbitrator or referee tends to increase rivalry, as does taking sides and blaming one child or trying to find a guilty party.



### Level 1 Normal Bickering

- Ignore it
- Tell yourself the children are having an important experience in conflict resolution

### Level 2 Situation Heating up. Adult intervention might be helpful

- Acknowledge their anger
- Reflect each child's point of view
- Describe the problem with respect
- Express confidence in the children's ability to find their own solution / assist with some possible strategies
- Leave the room

### Level 3 Situation possibly dangerous

- Inquire "is this a play fight or a real fight?"
- Let the children know "Play fighting is by mutual consent only". (If it is not fun for both, it has to stop.)

### Level 4 Situation definitely dangerous. Adult intervention necessary

- Describe what you see
- Separate the children

### Helping children resolve a difficult conflict

- Call a meeting of the concerned parties and explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Explain the ground rules.
- Write down each child's feelings and concerns. Read them aloud to make sure you've understood them correctly.
- Allow each child time for rebuttal.
- Invite everyone to suggest as many solutions as possible. Write down solutions without evaluating.
- Decide upon the solutions you can all live with.
- Follow up

from ***Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too*** by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.  
Highly recommended reading!

Tip sheets from Doncare Parent Workshops can be found on [www.doncare.org.au](http://www.doncare.org.au)