

About Sibling Rivalry

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Nowhere in our (supposedly) civilized, digitized, artificially flavored, technicolored world is the rule of the jungle so evident as in the competition between siblings. Watch your kids in action and witness Darwinian adaptation, survival of the fittest and behavioral extinction at work before your eyes.

Sibling rivalry is a primitive process. It is animal territorialism at its most basic level. It is the primal urge to win limited resources in order to survive played out over such critical necessities as the t.v. clicker, the last bowl of Fruit Loops and time on the internet. In fact, eons ago, little caveboys and cavegirls very likely had to compete for food and shelter in order to live long enough to become caveparents themselves, just as birds and bears and fishes do today. But your kids? Certainly by three or four or five years old they've realized that survival in the twenty-first century depends not at all on fitness (else ninety percent of us wouldn't be around to read this).

Why then do they fight so much?

W e all need our space. Growing up is about defining identity. It's a gradual back-and-forth dance moving away from a secure base (you) and then running back for comfort. Its about pushing away from the familiar in order to define self. As much as growing up is about growing away from parents, it is equally so about defining oneself as separate from siblings.

Space is not only the final frontier, it is also the first. Toddlers push one another away to define their space. Grade schoolers fuss over siblings who get into their space.

Teenagers –well, its hardly necessary to say the obvious: Teenagers guard their space better than Brinks trucks guard their cash; better than the CIA guards its secrets.

Guard from whom? Kids protect their space from us, their parents, with the same mixed feelings that come with growing up and growing apart. But there is far less ambivalence about separating from siblings. They're the competition. They're the ones who threaten to steal all of mommy's love and daddy's time, abstract commodities too hard to identify, so instead they fight over things that are concrete and immediate. The t.v. clicker. The last Fruit Loop.

So sibling rivalry is all about the parents? Not completely, but its likely that many of those hair-raising, gut-wrenching, tattle-taling conflicts are actually about winning your precious attention, affection and acceptance. Have you noticed, for example, that the kids get along better when they're own their own, away from you? This is a clue that the fight really isn't about the t.v. clicker and that the resolution isn't simply about allowing Billy to choose the channel on odd numbered dates and Sally to choose the channel on even numbered dates. Its really about winning little bits of you doled out as attention and praise, love and hugs and kisses.

Sibling rivalry is also about differentiation. Differentiation is the process of becoming distinct or unique. Its about finding a niche in which you can thrive different from the competition's niche. It's the same process that business people know so well: If three restaurants open in the same small town, each has to specialize in order to survive. One advertises Mexican cuisine. Another becomes known for preparing seafood. A third features omelets.

Your kids have to learn to differentiate in just the same way. Some combination of built-in strengths and praise and support leads each to discover a way to shine un eclipsed by a sister or a brother's success. One son becomes a jock, for example, and his brother an academic. One daughter becomes a musician while her sister excels with computers. One child is into science and another more a socialite. In this way, each finds a new source of support and nurturance and belonging and acceptance apart from the family and distinct from the siblings. No matter how painful or combative or loud, this process is healthy and necessary. Its essentially about defining oneself and growing up.

What's a parent to do? Does this mean that we should just leave our kids to beat each other up, content that the victor has distinguished him- or herself from the victim? Of course not. But when and how you step into the fray may be a bit more complicated than simply pulling the two combatants apart.

1. Start by recognizing that conflict in your home is not only natural, but its necessary. That idealized picture of the constantly blissful, cooperative family is fantasy promoted by fifties era television shows. Get over it. The fact is that you and your kids must argue. Sibling rivalry happens. Conflict is loud and painful and disruptive but its an essential part of growing up and growing apart. The goal is not to live without conflict. The goal is to make conflict manageable and healthy for all involved.
2. Know that your attention, affection and acceptance are the fuel which keeps your kids going. Find ways to refuel each child in the way and on the schedule that the child needs, not on your schedule or in your way.

3. Know that siblings naturally seek to differentiate. Help (but don't push!) each child to explore their unique interests and strengths. Applaud not only their successes but their efforts, as well.
4. Don't fall into the, "its not fair!" trap. They're right. It is not fair. Its not supposed to be. Your job as a parent is to try to see that each child gets what he or she needs, not what a brother or a sister had when they were a certain age. Respond to, "Its not fair!" calmly by saying, "You're right. Now let's talk about feeling so (mad? Sad? Jealous? Resentful?)"
5. Set rules for conflict, then live by them. Do this at a calm time as a family together. What's your family's rule about tattling? About name calling? About swearing and hitting and other kinds of hurting? Make sure to conduct your adult conflicts by the same rules!
6. The most important rule must concern safety: "No one will get hurt here" or "Violence is never okay in our family." The second most important rule allows combatants to walk away to calm down. Being able to "take five" and then return to an argument calmer and more constructive is a very mature skill.
7. Try not to take sides. Your primary job is to respond to how the combatants are behaving together, not to judge what they each claim the other did. If you find two kids hitting, they're both wrong. There's rarely anything to be gained listening to, "But HE started it ...!"
8. Make the healing as loud and as visible and the conflict. Parents who argue in front of the kids but make up behind closed doors leave the kids in suspense,

uncertain whether the wounds are healed and without any model of how to settle down and move on. The same can be true when two children battle in front of a third or when you argue with one child in front of the other.

----- Parenting Pointer-----

Consider these basics as part of your SRDP (Sibling Rivalry Defense Plan):

1. Do you want him to apologize because you forced him to, “say that you’re sorry!” or because he’s really sorry? Better, perhaps, to suggest, “If you’re sorry for something you did you might say so” than to make apologizing into just another power struggle.
2. Ask each child to take responsibility for his or her own words and actions without blaming the other. Try debriefing after a conflict with each child separately. Ask, “What did you do right?” and “What did you do wrong” and “What should you do differently next time?”
3. Set aside a place for conflict. One Mom decided that anytime the kids wanted to argue they could do so in the dry bathtub. The idea was so silly that most conflicts dissolved into giggles before they could escalate into anything worse.
4. Prescribe the problem: Do your kids argue predictably every morning before breakfast? Every day after school? Beat them to the punch. Set aside a five minute period and tell them to argue. “This is your chance, kids! Come on, get

it out now!” Sometimes for some kids this will defuse a time bomb before it can explode.