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How to avoid sibling rivalry

How to stop sibling rivalry. How to reduce sibling rivalry. How to avoid sibling rivalry with new baby. Ways to prevent sibling rivalry. How to prevent sibling rivalry.

Registered social worker Pauline Sevitz discusses the roots of sibling rivalry, and how parents can use their experiences with their own siblings to curb or positively redirect rivalry between their children. As Pauline Sevitz points out, sibling rivalry dates back as far as time. Think Cain and Abel, Mary and Anne Boleyn, Venus and Serena Williams. In fact, sibling rivalry is even common among some animal species – a black eagle mother, for instance, lays two eggs, and the first-hatched chick pecks the younger one to death within the first few days! ‘Astoundingly, approximately one third of all adults describe their relationships with their siblings as either rivalrous or distant,’ said Sevitz, adding, however, that relationships, fortunately, do tend to improve: ‘Some 80% of those over 60 years of age say that they have a good relationship with their siblings. What is sibling rivalry? In psychological terms, sibling rivalry refers to competition or animosity between blood relations or even blended families,’ continued Sevitz, explaining that ‘siblings generally spend more time together during childhood than they do with parents and, in these days of dual-income families and even child-headed households, this is more than ever the case. ‘The sibling bond is a complicated one, influenced by factors such as parental treatment, birth order, personality, and people and experiences outside the family,’ she went on, adding that research shows that sibling rivalry is particularly intense when children are very close in age and of the same gender. ‘Studies also show that sibling rivalry is more prevalent between brothers than sisters and is most severe between twins.’ How then do we draw on our own, sometimes painful, experiences as a sibling to effectively stop our kids from killing one another? Sevitz had the following suggestions: 1.



Understand that sibling rivalry is normal David Levy coined the term ‘sibling rivalry’ in 1941, claiming that, for an older sibling, ‘the aggressive response to the new baby is so typical that it is safe to say it is a common feature of family life.’ ‘Much of sibling rivalry has its roots in the process of individuation and separation, as each child in a family competes to define who they are as individuals and as beings separate from their siblings yet still a part of the family unit,’ says Sevitz. She refers to the work of Judith Dunn, an author and professor of developmental psychology at King’s College London, who argues that competition and rivalry between siblings begins at a very early age. ‘From three years old, children have a sophisticated grasp of social rules and know their “role” in the family. They also know just how to comfort a sibling, on the one hand, and, on the other, how to be unnervingly mean to a brother or sister,’ Sevitz says. She explains that when peers take on added value in the adolescence phase, the sibling relationship is affected once more: ‘While the older sibling is attempting to establish a sense of belonging outside the family, the younger sibling may well feel abandoned or betrayed.’ Other milestone events that test sibling relationships identified by Sevitz are the marriage of one sibling or the death of the parents: ‘Such occasions have the power to bring siblings that much closer but, unfortunately, also to irreparably sever their bond.’ 2. Avoid labels ‘Children get labelled from an early age – “the clever one”, “the difficult one”, “the pretty one”, “the baby”,’ says Sevitz adding that, of course, such labelling is generally not done deliberately by parents. ‘But the fact remains that these labels frequently stay with us right into adulthood. Have you ever noticed how, when adult children are together in the parental home, no matter how accomplished or mature they are in their separate lives, they tend to revert back to their childhood “roles”? Don’t also make the mistake of thinking that because one child has a particular talent, another cannot share it. ‘There can be more than one “gifted piano player” in the family, even if this means buying two pianos,’ says Sevitz, adding that, by the same token, it is also very important for parents to celebrate the differences between their children.’ 3. Don’t take favourites While not picking favourites can be easier said than done (you may relate more to one of your children than another or simply share similar personalities), showing preferential treatment is asking for trouble. Sevitz once more refers to Dunn’s findings that even from as early as age one, children are sensitive to parents favouring one sibling over another and, by the age of 18 months, the unwritten codebook of sibling ‘rules’ is established. She also points out that grandparents have an important role to play when it comes to choosing favourites: ‘The firstborn child of a favoured son, for instance, who gets the lion’s share of Granny’s attention, can be a cause of much pain for his younger siblings.’ 4. Butt out! Stop trying to rescue your more vulnerable child, Sevitz insists. ‘Your role as a parent is to teach your children effective conflict resolution, but not to fight the fight for them.



Only step in if there’s a danger of physical harm. If you always intervene, you risk creating other problems. The kids may start expecting your help and wait for you to come to the rescue rather than learning to work out the problems on their own. There’s also the risk that you – inadvertently –make it appear to one child that another is always being “protected”, which could foster even more resentment. By the same token, “rescued” kids may feel that they can get away with more because they’re always being “saved” by a parent. If you do have to step in, your role is that of facilitator, trying to resolve problems with your kids, not for them.’ 5. Be a good role model The way that parents resolve problems and disagreements sets a strong example for kids, says Sevitz. ‘So if you and your spouse work through conflicts in a way that’s respectful, productive, and not aggressive, you increase the chances that your children will adopt those tactics when they run into problems with one another.’ If, however, your kids see you routinely shout, slam doors, and loudly argue when you have problems, they’re likely to pick up those bad habits themselves.’ Interested in learning more about psychology? SACAP offers a range of courses, including part-time and full-time as well as distance learning options. For more information, enquire now. Share on PinterestEvery parent of more than one child dreams big when it comes to raising siblings: We picture our little ones sharing clothes and toys, wearing matching outfits in holiday photos, and defending one another against bullies on the playground. Basically, we expect them to become literal BFFs. The reality is this, though: When you’re raising two or more kids, you’re dealing with wildly different personalities and temperaments. There’ll be competition. There’ll be jealousy and resentment. There’ll be fights, and some will be intense. So what can you, as a parent, do to sow some seeds of peace? Here’s everything you need to know about the sources of sibling rivalry – and how you can help your kids behave more like friends and less like mortal enemies. Sibling rivalry describes the ongoing conflict between kids raised in the same family. It can happen between blood-related siblings, stepsiblings, and even adopted or foster siblings. It might take the form of verbal or physical fightingname-callingtattling and bickeringbeing in constant competition for parental attentionvoicing feelings of envy!’s stressful for mom or dad, but it’s totally normal — we challenge you to find a parent in the world who hasn’t dealt with it!What causes sibling rivalry? Let’s be honest: Sometimes you feel like picking a fight with your spouse or partner, right? Of course you do! You live with them 24/7. Tight-knit family bonds are a good thing, but they can also breed a perfectly normal amount of irritation with one another. The same thing happens between siblings, and because you’re dealing with developmentally immature little people, those irritations can be compounded by a few other factors:Major life changes. Moving into a new home? Expecting a new baby? Getting a divorce? These events are stressful for parents and kids alike, and many kids take their frustrations and anxieties out on the nearest target (i.e., their little sister).Ages and stages. Ever watched a toddler lay the smack down on their poor, unsuspecting baby sibling? There are some developmental stages when sibling rivalry is worse, like when both kids are under 4 or there are especially large or small age gaps between siblings. Jealousy. Your 3-year-old painted a beautiful picture at daycare and you praised them for it... and now their older sibling is threatening to rip it up. Why? They’re feeling jealous of the praise. Individuality. Kids have a natural inclination to set themselves apart, including from their siblings. This can spark competitions to see who can build the taller tower, race the fastest car, or eat the most waffles. It may seem trivial to you, but it feels hugely important to them. Lack of conflict resolution skills. If your kids routinely see you and your partner fighting in loud or aggressive ways, they may role model that behavior. They literally might not know any other way to handle their conflicts. Family dynamics. If one child has a chronic illness or special needs, been treated differently because of birth order, or had negative behaviors reinforced, it can throw off the way everyone in the family communicates with and treats one another. Before you start blaming yourself for all the life choices you’ve made that have caused your kids to hate each other on the daily, take a deep breath. Siblings are going to fight, with or without your interference. Your choices can contribute to or even worsen an existing sibling rivalry, but chances are you haven’t directly caused your kids to compete with one another.



Plus, no matter what you do, you can’t stop it completely. That said, there are parental behaviors that can exacerbate sibling rivalry. If you do any of the following (even unknowingly), you could be setting yourself — and your kids — up for a lot of angst: constantly praise one child and criticize anotherpit your kids against one another in competitionassign specific family roles (“Julia is the math whiz, and Benjamin is the artist.”)clearly pay more attention to one child’s needs and interestsExamples of sibling rivalry What does sibling rivalry actually look like? Here are a few ways it might happen in your home. Your 3-year-old son “accidentally” sits on his 2-month-old baby brother while he’s lying on a play mat. When you ask your older son what happened, he says, “I don’t like the baby! I don’t want him to live here anymore.” One minute, your 5- and 7-year-old daughters are happily playing with their trains, and the next minute they’re screaming about who gets to push the blue train around the track. By the time you get to their bedroom, they’re crying and refusing to play with each other anymore. After dinner, your three kids (ages 6, 9, and 11) start arguing about what show to watch on TV before bed. There’s no consensus; each child thinks their pick should “win.” According to Nemours, when a fight breaks out between your kids, you should try to stay out of it as much as possible. Your kids won’t learn how to negotiate their own conflicts if you’re always interfering and playing peacemaker. At the same time, your kids will only learn how to appropriately handle conflict if they see good conflict resolution in action (i.e., they learn it from you), and some kids are too little to navigate it anyway. Here’s how to model conflict resolution in the examples given in the previous section. Keep things simple. Perhaps say, “Your brother is a part of our family, and we need to take care of the people in our family.” Remove your older child (or your baby) from the room until your 3-year-old is calm. Later, you may want to soothe your older son’s insecurities by giving him some one-on-one attention or encouraging him to talk about all the fun things he hopes to do with his baby brother as he gets older. For some reason, the blue train has been deemed “better,” but it can’t be in two places at once. Your daughters have a choice: They can share the blue train or lose it. Calmly present this choice, and let them decide.



If the fighting persists, simply take the blue train away. If they come to a reluctant truce, remind them that any continued fighting will result in all of the trains taking a “time out.” At this age, your kids can take part in the solution-generating part of conflict resolution. Perhaps say, “It seems like you can’t agree on what to watch.



Should I pick something?” When they protest, give them one chance to work it out themselves (i.e., splitting up the TV time between picks or assigning each person a designated “TV choice night”). No peaceful agreement in 5 minutes means no TV, period. The common thread in these scenarios is that you, as the parent, are taking the role of sideline advisor, not on-the-field referee. When encouraging conflict resolution between your kids, it’s important to: avoid taking sides — unless you witnessed one child hurting another without provocation, everyone involved in the fight takes some share of the blameencourage a solution that’s beneficial to everyone, even if it involves some compromiseet limits, like no name-calling or physical contact (“You can say you’re mad, but you can’t hit your sister.”)teach empathy, encouraging your kids to put themselves in their siblings’ shoes (“Remember when Patrick wouldn’t share his coloring book with you yesterday? How did that make you feel?”)avoid playing favorites, as kids will notice if you always baby your youngest or believe your oldest child’s version of the storyRemember, you probably didn’t cause sibling rivalry between your kids — but you may be inadvertently making it worse. Thankfully, there are a few easy ways to promote more camaraderie in your house. You can’t stop it completely, but implementing these parenting strategies may reduce how often your kids fight. Forget what you know about “fairness.” If all kids are different, then how you parent all kids should be different, too. One child may need a different kind of attention, responsibility, and discipline to thrive than another. Prioritize one-on-one time. On a daily basis, try to devote a few minutes to check in with each of your kids individually. Then, on a weekly or monthly basis, try to spend some “alone time” doing a favorite activity together. Promote a team culture in your family. When parents and siblings act like a team working toward common goals, members tend to get along better and not compete as much. Give everyone some space. If your kids share a bedroom, designate areas of the house where they can each retreat to get a break from one another. Introduce family meetings. This is a great opportunity for all family members to air grievances, offer solutions, and work through conflicts away from the heat of the moment. Your kids are going to fight. It’s probably not your fault, but if the fighting is excessive or truly disrupting household harmony, it’s time to take a look at how conflicts are modeled and resolved in your family. There are often small ways you can adjust your parenting techniques to promote better cooperation between your kids. And if you need more help, you can reach out to your pediatrician or a family therapist for more tips.