



Sibling rivalry: it's all in the family

IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER WHEN YOUR CHILDREN ARE FIGHTING that sibling rivalry is a normal part of family life. In fact, this natural tension between brothers and sisters can help children learn how to negotiate, compromise and happily coexist—skills that will serve them well throughout their lives.

This is a lifelong process and the key is for parents to help their children learn how to navigate through these small daily confrontations in a way that actually builds family bonds.

Before birth

- Encourage positive thinking well before the baby arrives. Focus on the child's important new role as an older sibling.
- Explain and actively demonstrate what sharing means by sharing food or a pillow or other appropriate items with your child.
- Create a sense of excitement around the baby's arrival; talk about all the fun things he will get to do with the baby, such as read to her or help fold the baby's clothes.
- Encourage your child to draw pictures or write stories about the new baby.
- Make sure your child has the opportunity to practice sharing and socializing skills with other children before a new baby comes along.

Infants and toddlers

- Create a calm, inclusive atmosphere for the new siblings and provide opportunities for them to bond.
- Make your older child feel important through positive feedback ("The baby just smiled at you! He thinks you are a great big sister.")
- Give your older child a special toy or doll to take care of so the child can model your nurturing behavior with the new baby.
- Let your child pick out the baby's clothes or do other small tasks to make her feel important and actively involved.
- When the older child inevitably acts up or misbehaves to get your attention, talk to the child calmly, reassure her and give a hug. Don't dwell on minor issues and resist the urge to overcompensate with attention or gifts.



Children

- As your children get older and have fights over toys or TV or other minor skirmishes, correct the misbehavior and then move on.
- Encourage the children to work out problems on their own, rather than expecting you to be a referee.
- Help them understand their feelings; help them understand the problem; help them come up with a solution.
- Reinforce good behavior: notice and celebrate sharing and compromising.
- Don't try to make everything equal between your children; instead recognize that each child is unique and work for balance among your individual relationships.
- Spend quality time with each child and make sure that time is customized to each child's individual interests.
- Make sure siblings have their own space so they can have time independent of each other, even if that space is just a corner of a room.
- Avoid motivations or disciplines that inadvertently create competition, for example, "Whoever cleans up first gets to pick tonight's book." Instead encourage a team effort: "If we all clean up, then we'll have time for a book tonight."

Adults

- Keep your perspective and a good sense of humor.
- Remember that, handled well, sibling rivalry can become the basis of family bonds that are resilient and enduring. ❖