

## "She started it!"

### Parents and parent educators share tips on calming sibling rivalry

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—GLO WELLMAN,  
Parent Educator, California  
Parenting Institute,  
Santa Rosa

On the best days, siblings can have parents beaming: sharing toys, working as a team to clean their room, looking out for each other on the playground. On the worst days, siblings seem ready to start a war over who gets the front seat, who got the bigger piece of pie, and who's Mom's favorite.

"Parents sometimes feel that if their kids aren't best friends, they're doing something wrong," says Jeff Anderson, director of outpatient services at the Sierra Vista Children's Center in Modesto. But sibling rivalry is normal and can even be healthy for children's development.

Sibling relationships provide "an important opportunity for children to learn to problem-solve in an environment of unconditional love," says Glo Wellman, a parent educator at the California Parenting Institute in Santa Rosa.

While there's no easy answer to easing sibling rivalry, child development specialists and parents suggest the following.

#### With a new baby, be sure to include the older child as much as possible.

While a new baby keeps parents busy and sleep-deprived, there are ways to keep your older child from feeling pushed aside. Parents should try to avoid saying, "I'm with the baby now. I can't help you," according to the *Sibling Preparation Guidebook* by Mary Jane DeWolf-Smith, director of the A.P.P.L.E. Family Center in San Rafael. Parents can say, "I have to feed the baby now; come read with me." Or "I have to change the baby; come show me your drawing."

#### Find something special to celebrate individually with each child.

Claudia Burgoz, an associate Head Start teacher in Monterey County, has four sons and one foster son living with her. The oldest is 12, the youngest just three months. Earlier this year, her oldest son celebrated his first communion, and Burgoz and her husband planned a celebration dinner with him alone. "I'm lucky that I have a large 'village' of relatives and friends to help when we want to do something special with one of the kids," she says. "Next week, when my five-year-old has a kindergarten tea party, I'll be there for that."

#### Have positive answers for "I hate her" or "You love him more than me."

First of all, says Wellman, "I tell parents not to take it personally"—for themselves or the siblings. To respond to "I hate him," she says, "I say, 'Yes, you're really angry right now.' Then move on and deal with what they're angry about. When kids say, 'You love her more,' you need to tell them, 'I love you just the way you are, but how I respond to you [is different] because you have different needs.' Most kids just don't hear that enough—you have to say it over and over."



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**Try to spend some time, even just 10 minutes, alone with each child each day.** Anderson says one of his clients had three daughters who were competing, each complaining that another was "Mommy's favorite." The mother decided to spend a little time each day with each child, one-on-one—that ended a lot of the fighting.

The one-on-one attention "can be as simple as listening to what happened at school that day," says Halfrid Nelson, public relations manager at the Children's Services Network of Fresno County. "But those little moments help a child feel secure"—and often less threatened by siblings.

#### Don't expect too much from your oldest child or too little from the youngest.

While additional responsibilities are okay, says Nelson, parents sometimes need to remind themselves that the older child is still just a child. Similarly, some parents expect too little from the youngest. "As soon as they're old enough, they need to understand that rules are for everyone in the family," says Wellman.

#### Don't be too quick to jump in. Try to let siblings work out their own problems.

Different parents have different standards for when to get involved. For some, an occasional shove is OK. For others, any physical force is forbidden. In Wellman's family, yelling is her cue to intervene. Wherever parents draw the line, "They need to observe their kids and know them well enough to understand when the energy is getting to a place where they will need to intervene," Wellman says.

#### When you get involved, keep it positive.

Parents should try to stay out of the "he started it, she started it" argument. Rather than trying to figure out who's at fault, Anderson says parents can often help by suggesting that the children separate. "Some of our parents have had success with this because the kids often pull together and stop arguing. Even when they're bickering, most kids would rather play

together than alone," he says.

If you walk into a room where two kids are fighting, Wellman says, "Make sure you don't say, 'OK, what's going on here?' Right away the kids are on the spot and you're in the middle. Instead, try saying, 'This doesn't sound good. Do you need help resolving this or can you do it on your own?'"

If your help is needed, be a moderator, not a judge, she advises. "I would try to help each of them talk about what's frustrating them. Then I would ask each, 'What do you need right now to feel better?'"

#### At calmer times, teach skills and values.

When there's no fight going on, parents can set an atmosphere of respect and love, Wellman adds, and teach skills like sharing, taking turns, and conflict resolution. Then "when my boys are arguing I can say, 'Hey, guys, this doesn't sound respectful. You need to find a better way to say this.' Children need to be taught to use statements like 'I don't like that' or 'I'm angry.' It's not right to let them fight it out if it turns mean-spirited."

#### Don't force apologies or hugs.

It's important for parents to validate their children's feelings. "Tell them, 'It's okay to be mad at your brother, but it's not okay to hit him,'" says Anderson. He says forced apologies or hugs can lead to more resentment. On the other hand, he adds, there's nothing wrong with encouraging children to say they're sorry or to help the hurt sibling feel better with a back rub or ice pack. ■