

# How To Handle Sibling Rivalry

By Betty Moore

How many times have you planned a family outing only to have two of your children ruin the day by bickering the whole time? Sibling rivalry is a normal part of growing up and it occurs among brothers and sisters who are related by blood as well as those who are adopted or who become a part of the family through second or third marriages.

There are many reasons for sibling rivalry, among them differences in personality, age and temperament. Insecurity is frequently caused when younger children feel pressured to follow in the footsteps of an accomplished older brother or sister. Jealousy also leads to fights as siblings compete for their parents' attention.

Parental attitude goes a long way in resolving sibling disputes. You have to set the standards for behavior and make it clear that family members must treat each other with respect and kindness. When your children are different ages it may be difficult for a younger sibling to comprehend why an older brother or sister gets to stay up later or spend more time away from home with friends. If you explain that reaching a certain age brings more privileges and responsibilities, it will be easier for a child to understand.

Most parents make an effort to treat their children equally but there will always be times when one child needs more attention than another. If you treat your children fairly and dole out rewards and punishment as they are earned or deserved, your children will learn to respect you and be less resentful when one child garners more attention at a particular time. For example, a seven-year-old may be resentful of the time his mother spends tending to a baby brother or sister. It is important to let the older child know he is loved as much as ever and that the baby is getting more attention temporarily because he can't care for himself. Whenever possible set aside time with the older child to read together at bedtime, or involve the older child in caring for the baby to lessen any feelings of rivalry.

Try to avoid comparing your children to one another or expecting them to develop the same interests that you have. Recognize their individual personalities and skills and encourage them to shine in their own way. If a slow-learning child is constantly compared to an overachieving brother or sister, he may become resentful of his sibling.

If you permit your children to vocalize negative thoughts and feelings but limit their aggressive or

destructive behavior, you can help lessen their feelings of rivalry. Rather than making your children feel guilty for having mean thoughts, it is more important to make them understand that wanting to hit Joey over something he did is different from actually striking him. For example, stating to an angry six-year-old that "hitting is not allowed" sends a clear message that physical violence will not be tolerated as a means of expressing anger. Children who are taught to control their destructive impulses by talking over their feelings rather than acting on them have a better chance of working out their problems constructively.

When your child expresses resentment toward a brother or sister, encourage him to talk about it. Your younger son may feel less rejected by his older brother if you explain that older boys need some time alone to work on projects and time to be with their friends. Encouraging your older son to spend some time with his younger brother so that he doesn't always feel left out can go a long way in smoothing over hurt feelings.

Children who are the same sex and who are closer in age are more likely to have feelings of rivalry. One may be more popular in school, or one may be more athletic, which can increase feelings of jealousy or envy. Try to set aside some alone time with each child every day to talk about their feelings, goals and what is happening at school.

Most of the time it's best to give siblings time to settle an argument themselves before you step in. If you always intercede, they won't learn how to stand up for themselves or resolve their own arguments. However, if things are escalating, let them know you won't stand for one bullying or hurting the other. Teach your children skills for handling conflicts such as sharing a toy, using a timer to determine how long one can play a video game, and learning to compromise.

By helping your children deal with sibling rivalry before it gets out of hand you can help strengthen their relationship and help forge a bond that will remain with them throughout their lives.