

# Sibling Conflict: How to Prevent It

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When we consider the various brothers and sisters mentioned in the corridors of history, we can easily conclude that conflict between siblings is a natural occurrence. And it is. From Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, to your own siblings, conflict is the result of a human agent—mankind’s self-oriented propensities, desires and whims that often clash with those around us. With children conflict is not the result of differences with a sibling but a lack of maturity to handle those differences. This is where parents can and should make a difference.

Before taking up the subject of sibling conflict we must first speak of to the matter of sibling rivalry. The two are not the same. Sibling rivalry takes place when a child perceives that he is not loved, or loved as much, or is in danger of losing parental love. First, a child may act out to gain his parents’ attention. If that does not work, he will act up against his parents for attention and control.

Where as sibling rivalry is between child and parent, sibling conflict is between siblings. Some mistakenly believe that sibling conflict is a phase children will grow out of naturally. Not so. It is a moral challenge in need of instruction, encouragement and appropriate correction. What can a parent do to help minimize conflict within the home?

First, understand it. Know that although sibling conflict is frustrating for any parent to observe, the good news is, it is curable. Set your standards high. Strive for true sacrificial love among family members. Do not be satisfied with siblings who just tolerate each other but siblings who look out for the emotional and moral welfare of each other. How do you get there?

## One

At the appropriate age, help your children learn how to resolve their own conflicts. Teach them early on that peaceably resolving their own conflicts is sometimes better than having Dad or Mom come and resolve them. Include in this strategy the rule of “no tattling.” Tattling does not resolve sibling conflict but extends them.

There is an old Hebrew proverb that reminds us: The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him. Children bring reports to their parents about siblings for many reasons; some are legitimate, and others are not. The legitimate reasons include health and safety concerns or the honest desire for parental intervention and justice. With the latter, the child has learned that sometimes it’s better to consult a neutral mediator rather than escalate the conflict (by striking back at a sibling).

Actual tattling is when a brother or sister snitches for the sole purpose of getting another sibling in trouble. This is malice; the desire to see others receive pain. In the hierarchy of childhood crimes, this may be one of the worst offenses. Often, it is done in hopes of gaining both parental approval and assistance—approval for not being the one doing

wrong, and assistance in gaining the upper hand on his sibling by bringing the matter to his parents' attention.

Teach your children the difference between coming to you with legitimate concerns and coming to get a sibling in trouble. Humility and concern, not malice, was what prompted one sibling to report on another. Even then, they could not come unless they had first tried to get their sibling to stop whatever he or she was doing wrong before coming to Mom or Dad. It works well.

### Two

Require verbal and physical kindness between siblings. Teach verbal and physical self-control. Give your children guidance in relation to their treatment of siblings and friends. These boundaries include restrictions on hitting, pushing, talking back, and a general lack of self-control. Take advantage of family times (such as at the dinner table or driving in the car) to model this. Take turns sharing what each one appreciates about another member of the family.

One common-sense rule is for children to keep their hands to themselves. If a sibling gets hit, rather than striking back, he must have the confidence to know that his parents will bring justice. The door of escape is not retaliation, but seeking out the one in charge, whether it be Mom at home or a teacher on the playground. Justice comes from rightly exercised authority and not a child who seeks revenge.

You have heard it said, "If you don't have something nice to say, don't say anything at all." Your children should never speak rudely to each other. Evil intended remarks such as, "I don't love you," "You're ugly," or threats like, "I'm going to tell," are unacceptable. Keep watch! Training children to restrain their unkind speech is one of the most overlooked areas in parenting.

### Three

Teach your children how to respect each other. The following areas of training are often overlooked:

- listening attentively to a brother or a sister
- responding with the basic courtesies and greetings such as, "Please," "Thank you," "Good Night," "I'm sorry," or, "Will you forgive me?"
- interrupting properly, with only one person speaking at a time
- sharing property that is reasonable to share
- being genuinely happy when something good happens to a sibling

### Four

Encourage your children to be happy when something wonderful happens to a sibling or friend, such as when one receives an award, wins at a board game, or has an opportunity that the others do not have. Your constant encouragement in this area can make the difference between ongoing bickering between siblings and a peaceful home.

Another way this is realized is at a sibling's birthday. You do not need to buy a gift for everyone attending the child's party. That only robs the birthday child of his special day. It teaches the siblings to selfishly look forward to a day of gifts rather than a day of giving, celebrating the birth of a brother or sister.

Mothers will often say, "I don't want anyone to feel bad because he didn't get a gift." But they will all receive a gift—each one on his own birthday. And if someone feels bad that he didn't get a gift, that only tells you where that child needs some work—the virtue of contentment.

### Five

Provide an environment that will encourage service to others. Take household chores, for example. Researchers from Toronto, Canada, and from Macquarie University in Australia studied children from families who were given daily chores and those who were not. Their research pointed toward some interesting conclusions.

Children who performed household chores showed more compassion for their siblings and other family members than children who did not share in family responsibility. Even more interesting was the fact that not all chores were considered equal. The kids who did family-care chores, like setting the table, feeding the cat, or bringing in firewood, showed more concern for the welfare of others than children who had only self-care responsibilities, such as making their own bed and hanging up their own clothes.

Whenever children participate in the care of others, they grow sensitive to human need. Include your children in helping to secure the welfare of your family. That may mean bringing in firewood every day after school, helping out with weeding the garden, or setting or clearing the table. Whatever it may look like in your home, include your children in the experience of daily serving others. Their joy in doing so may surprise even you.