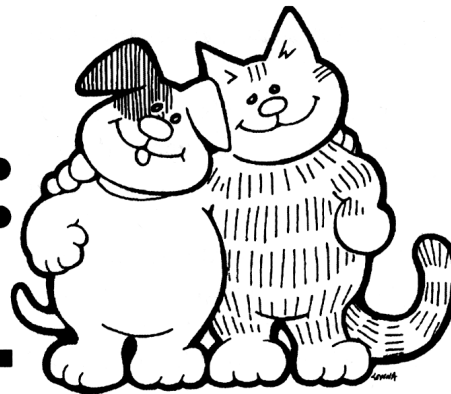


# Getting Along: Sibling Fights



## Why kids quarrel...

- » Basic needs
- » Attention
- » Companionship
- » Power

Understanding *why* kids quarrel can help you know what to do.

## BASIC NEEDS

It never fails. Whenever you are the busiest—shopping, cleaning, or running errands—quarreling and teasing break out. “Mom, he hit me.” “She took my book.” “He called me dumb!” Sound familiar?

## What parents can do

» **Ask** is what basic needs are not being met. Kids who are tired, hungry, or bored are not going to feel cheerful and cooperative. A few minutes of rest, a healthy snack, and some interesting things to do can work wonders.

## ATTENTION

Sometimes kids get into a bad habit of squabbling as a way of getting attention. If this situation seems common in your house, it may be time to “reprogram” your kids so that only good behavior gets rewarded.

## What parents can do

» **Ignore mild quarrels.** Ignoring sometimes works, but only if no one is in danger of getting hurt. Remain calm, and avoid speaking or looking at your children. If things don’t seem too out of control, you may find it helpful to leave the room or to listen to music with headphones. Ignoring works best when parents also make the effort to give attention for good behavior.

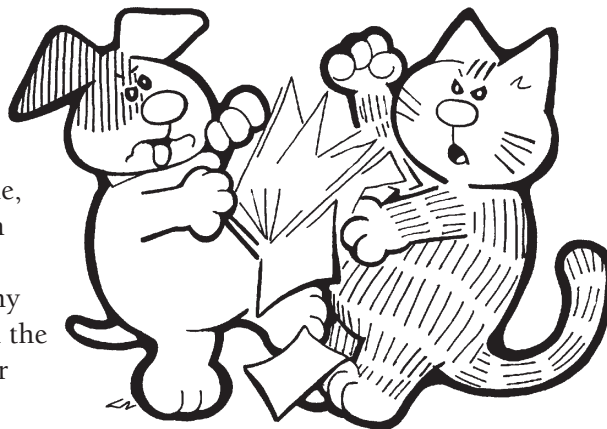
» **Spend time with each child.** Studies show that 15 to 20 minutes of one-to-one attention with a child per day will significantly reduce whining and aggressive behavior. Reading to your child, playing a game, or simply involving the child in everyday routine activities are good ways to give positive attention.

» **Teach children to ask for attention in a positive way.** Use statements like “When you need a hug, let me know”; “I can’t always play with you for a long time, but I almost always can take time to read you a book”; “Yelling hurts my ears, try tapping me on the shoulder and asking for help.”

» **Make each child feel uniquely special.** It is not necessary or even possible to treat children equally in every way. Each of your children has a unique personality and interests. Encourage those traits and interests. Avoid making comparisons, and try not to set your children up for competition. Saying “Angie loves to draw and paint” is better than saying “Angie is a better artist than Jason.”

## COMPANIONSHIP

Some children seem to have a knack for getting brothers and sisters to play with them. Other children seem to have greater difficulty doing this and quickly discover that starting a quarrel with a sibling is a sure way to get them involved.



## What parents can do

» **Teach children words to make play work well.** For some children this means something as basic as saying “Would you play with me?” or “May I play with that toy?” or “Can we take turns?” For others it means reminding them to say “please” and “thank you.”

» **Provide activities that children of different ages can do together.** Older children get very frustrated with younger siblings because they want to play but have limited skills. Teach older children how to give younger children a simple task to involve them in play. For example a 4-year-old could pretend to deliver pizza on his tricycle. His 5-year-old sister could make construction paper money and give it to the 3-year-old sister who would pay the delivery person and bring the pretend pizza into the house. A toddler who loves to push over blocks could be given her own set of blocks to stack, sort, and knock down while her older brother and sister build a block castle nearby. Some good activities for sibling play include pretend play, play dough, blocks, puppets, and musical activities.

» **Teach children how to negotiate or compromise.** Learning to trade one toy for another and learning to take turns are a child’s first lesson in the art of negotiation. Take the time to show a toddler how to trade for a toy rather than just grab for it. With older children, focus on how to take turns. Sometimes a timer helps. If one child doesn’t want to play, teach your other child how to make a deal to play later. Most 4- and 5-year-old children can

learn to find something else to do for at least 30 minutes. If children can’t agree on what to play, help them learn how to brainstorm ideas until they can come up with something they both agree on.

## POWER

Part of growing up is learning about personal power. Children naturally experiment to see whether they can get each other to do things. Children notice when a sibling can do something they cannot. Competition between siblings can sometimes make children feel very insecure and intolerant. Learning to handle competitive feelings is a real challenge for young children.

### What parents can do

» **Avoid taking sides.** For younger children, calmly but firmly separate the two children and lead them to separate rooms. Avoid yelling or lecturing. Talk with them only after they have had a few minutes to cool down.

For older children, have the kids sit on the floor near each other, but not too close (any place not too comfortable will do) and tell them that they can get up only when they each can tell you what they did wrong. Each child has to “confess” his or her own actions, not the other child’s. This technique helps children accept responsibility for their actions and lessens blaming.

» **Give children choices.** As children learn to make simple choices between wearing red or yellow socks, or playing with a train or a truck, they begin learning how to make decisions.

Sometimes they also learn the consequences of those simple decisions. Making good decisions takes practice. Parents can give children opportunities to learn about decision making. For example, when kids quarrel, parents can say “You can decide how to share the play dough, or I will put it away.”

» **Encourage win-win negotiations.** When children seem stuck in negotiations, it is often helpful to lead them through problem-solving steps: (1) stop the action, (2) listen to each other, (3) think of different ways to solve the problem, (4) choose an idea everyone agrees on. Children may need some adult assistance to carry out their problem-solving ideas. Also help children evaluate why their plan did or did not work. Most young children will need adult help in thinking through this process. Even though it takes time, doing this process over and over helps young children become fairly good at identifying a problem and coming up with ways to solve the problem on their own. A child who has lots of practice in thinking of different ways to solve a problem is much more likely to solve a conflict in a positive way.



## Problem-solving steps

1. Stop the action.
2. Listen to each other.
3. Think of different ways to solve the problem.
4. Choose an idea everyone agrees on.

## Encourage personal goals.

Sometimes it is helpful to encourage children to turn their competitive feelings into personal goals for themselves. In other words, help children to “compete” against themselves by improving their own skills.

For young children this may mean improving their skills in bouncing a ball, learning to skip, singing a song, building elaborate sand castles, or tying shoes. You also can use this opportunity to talk with your child about important values such as practicing, doing your best, trying hard, and so on.

## Don't overlook cruel behavior

Parents often will shrug off fighting and teasing between brothers and sisters with comments like “That’s just the way kids are” or “Kids will be kids.” However, sometimes fighting between siblings can get entirely out of hand.

Parents often ignore, deny, or overlook cruel behavior between their children. Yet thousands of adults have suffered serious emotional trauma from sibling abuse. Believe it or not, sibling violence is thought to occur more frequently than violence between parents and children or between spouses. Outside the home, much of this mistreatment would be considered assault. If someone else hit or abused a child, most parents would be outraged. But between siblings, it is usually ignored.

## Avoid comparisons

Parents compare children for a number of reasons. Often, they believe that such comparisons will shame children and give them an incentive to do better. But comparing children to each other often sets them up for a great deal of jealousy and envy later on. It is generally better to avoid comparisons. Focus your words and actions specifically on each child’s behavior. Correct or encourage children in a more positive way. For example:

### Five-year-old Sara is refusing to pick up toys.

What parent says	What child may feel	What parent could say instead
“How come your brother always cheerfully picks things up, when I ask, but you never do?”	My brother is a goody-goody. I hate him.	“Sara, toys left on the floor sometimes get stepped on or broken. I know you care about your toys and want to take good care of them. Pick them up please.”

### Mother watches son reading a book.

What parent says	What child may feel	What parent could say instead
“Boy, you’re terrific! I wish your brother was interested in books like you are. All he does is run around and make noise. He will never learn to read!”	Proud that mom is pleased. Also may feel: I’m not that wonderful; I feel sorry for my brother; I’m better than my brother because he is loud and dumb.	“You have been reading that book for the last half hour. That’s terrific. I’ll bet you are a really good reader.”

### Four-year-old Jason sits eating at the table.

What parent says	What child may feel	What parent could say instead
“You are a big boy. You don’t make a mess with food like the baby does.”	I’m better than the baby.	“I see that you have eaten all your peas and used your napkin to wipe your face. You are really learning good table manners.”

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## Characteristics of sibling abuse

### Physical

Physical abuse may involve hitting, biting, slapping, shoving, punching, tickling to excess, and injurious or life-threatening behavior such as choking or shooting with a BB gun.

### Emotional

This includes extreme teasing, name calling, belittling, ridiculing, intimidating, annoying, and provoking. Children also destroy personal possessions or torture and kill pets to get an emotional response from their victim.

### Sexual

Sexual abuse includes unwanted touching, indecent exposure, attempted penetration, intercourse, rape, or sodomy between siblings.

## How to tell when things have gone too far

Children respond to sibling abuse in different ways. Telltale signs include

- protecting themselves,
- screaming and crying,
- constantly avoiding a sibling,
- abusing a younger sibling in turn,
- acting out an emotionally abusive message,
- telling parents,
- fighting back, and
- submitting.

When difficulties between siblings get in the way of normal living, or become harmful or dangerous, things have gone too far. If you are having trouble with sibling abuse in your family, review the parenting suggestions in this publication. You also may want to seek professional help.

## References

1. *Kids Can Cooperate*, Elizabeth Crary, Parenting Press, 1984.
2. *Perilous Rivalry: When Siblings Become Abusive*, Vernon Wiehe, McMillan, 1991.
3. *Siblings Without Rivalry*, Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish, W.W. Norton, 1987.