

### References:

*Siblings Without Rivalry*, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish  
*The Sibling Bond*, Stephen P. Bank and Michael D. Kahn

### SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Sibling relationships have a great deal to do with how we think of ourselves. We learn how to have an intimate relationship with another person and these patterns can continue into marriage and family relationships in a healthy or disturbed way.

**A parents' goal** should not be to make sure the siblings become friends. Instead, teach them how to listen, respect each others differences, and find ways to resolve those differences, even if they never become friends.

**Two forces are at work with siblings:** One pushing them apart as they use their differences to define their uniqueness and the other pulling them together so they can experience the unique relationship of siblings.

### SIBLING ATTACHMENT:

Two factors determine how siblings influence one another early in life:

1. Social factors which are outside the child's control (when born, economic situation, where born, gender, age spacing, health, parental attitudes, emotional factors)
2. Subtle factors that operate within each child and between the children. These are often private, difficult to detect and occur between the ages of 1-3

**When a new child joins the family:** involve the older child(ren) instead of pushing them away out of fear the baby or new child is too fragile. If it's a birth child, involve older children during the pregnancy so the feel a sense of ownership and belonging.

### PARENTS INFLUENCE ON SIBLINGS:

A parent's influence can begin before birth with the parents' expectations for the child. Then the child's temperament determines some differences in treatment. A parents need to make each child different will result in identity roles for the child. The opposite can also occur, "fusing" or treating children equally can also creates jealousy and resentment.

Many parents think sibling rivalry is "normal" and common. They may **ignore bickering and fights**, discounting it as something that will pass. **These children may never learn healthy coping and conflict resolution skills.**

Other parents want to guide the relationship to the point that they **suppress any conflicts and demand the children behave like friends**. These children may **resent the parent, compete with the sibling** in an effort to involve the parent unnecessarily, and have lasting feelings of being forced into a relationship rather than having a natural relationship with their sibling.

## SIBLING RIVALRY

Many parents think that sibling fighting is the part of the sibling relationship they need to address. The **fighting is merely a symptom of feelings the children have but have difficulty expressing**. Parents really need to start by **addressing the causes of the rivalry**.

### 1) "Insisting upon good feelings between the children leads to bad feelings.

Allowing for bad feelings between the children leads to good feelings."

The very emotions that we want to close the door on and lock out, need to be invited in, made welcome, and treated with respect.

If we forbid the expression of the anger and rage the children feel, it will go underground and reappear in other forms, either as physical symptoms or emotional problems.

**Remember that there is an important difference between allowing feelings and allowing actions.** Hurtful actions need to be stopped and children need to be shown how to discharge angry feelings acceptably.

Children can be taught how to restate their emotions in a language that will enable them to move forward. They can acknowledge their feelings about each other:

With words that identify the feeling

With wishes

With symbolic or creative activity

**2) NEVER compare the children, positive or negative.** The effect is almost NEVER good. It does not motivate children, or make them feel good about themselves. It almost always increases the competition between them.

Rule of thumb: Whatever you want to tell this child can be said without reference to the other sibling. Simply DESCRIBE what you see.

### 3) Treating children equally makes them feel LESS important instead of more important. Treat children according to need, instead.

Forget equal amounts...give according to individual needs

Don't claim equal love...show them how they're loved uniquely.

Don't give equal time...give time in terms of need.

#### 4) Avoid putting children in roles and using labels.

There are several reasons parents do this:

- Misguided need to bolster a child's ego
- Bolster our own ego
- Project our own weaknesses
- Think we have each kid figured out
- Want each of them to feel special

Kids will put themselves in roles, too:

- To get love and approval
- To get attention, even if it's negative attention
- To feel that they have a place in the family, regardless of the desirability of the role.

Kids will push each other into roles.

Even if a role doesn't put one child above another, it is still limiting.

See children as whole people.

Treat your children, not as they are, but as you hoped they would become.

Encourage all of the children to take chances, explore their potential, discover their strengths, and pursue interests, even if they aren't the best at it.

**Bully/Victim Role:** Don't give your attention to the aggressor, attend to the injured party instead.

**Problem Children:** When one child is viewed as the "problem child" for whatever reason, certain dynamics go into motion:

- The problem child becomes more of a problem.
- The burdened parent begins to make demands upon the 'normal' children to compensate for the problem child.
- The needs of the normal siblings are brushed aside.
- The normal siblings begin to resent the problem child.

#### 5) When The Kids Fight: IF you intervene, do it helpfully.

Unhelpful ways are our initial instinct:

- |  |                             |
|--|-----------------------------|
| Tell them to stop                                | Find out who started it     |
| Take the toys away and send them to their rooms. | Take one's side             |
| Convince them to play nicely and to share        | Stick up for the little one |

When to step in...

- If one child is being abused by another
- If there's a problem that's disrupting the entire household.
- If there's a problem that keeps coming up and they can't resolve it.

## ***Levels of Fighting***

**Level I: Normal Bickering** - Ignore it, chalk it up to another practice session in conflict resolution. At the most, give a quick statement/reminder that you expect them to resolve their conflicts respectfully.

**Level II: Situation Heating up.** Adult intervention might be helpful.

Helpful way to intervene:

- 1) Start by acknowledging the children's anger towards each other. That alone should help calm them.
- 2) Listen to each child's side with respect.
- 3) Show appreciation for the difficulty of the problem.
- 4) Express faith in their ability to work out a mutually agreeable solution.
- 5) Leave the room.

**Level III: If they keep screaming...**Tell them that if they can't decide you will decide for them, and someone may not be happy with the decision. Later, they will need to sit down with you and work out some rules for what to do when the same problem comes up. **Use Problem-Solving:**

Call a meeting and explain the purpose

Explain the ground rules

Write down each child's feelings and concerns. Read them aloud.

Allow each child time for rebuttal

Invite everyone to suggest as many solutions as possible. Write all down.

Decide upon the solutions you can all live with.

Follow-up.

Don't use voting or flipping coins. There is always a loser. Use only as a last resort and acknowledge the losers feelings.

**Level IV: Situation possibly dangerous**

- 1) If you're not sure if they are playing...ask!
- 2) Let the children know. Play fighting is only by mutual consent.

**Level V: Situation definitely Dangerous**

- 1) Describe what you see.
- 2) Separate the children.

## **2 Techniques to Use When You Need a Quick Fix.**

**1. Problem-Solving "On The Run":**Sentence 1: acknowledge feelings and what the problem seems to be. Sentence 2: Ask what *the child(ren)* can do to solve the problem.

**2.** Tell them they need to solve the problem on their own, respectfully. If they can't/won't, tell them **if you need to solve it for them, they might not like your solution AND they will have to do problem solving with you later** to come up with a longer-term solution.