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Overcoming Sibling Rivalry in Families

by Rylie McBride

My older sister and I are no strangers to sibling rivalry. We had our fair amount of fights, squabbles, and competitiveness. It didn't help that we liked the same extracurricular activities and would often strive to outdo each other. Our mother made many attempts over the years to help us become better friends, though this task was challenging and sometimes frustrating.

Sibling rivalry seems to naturally emerge in any family with more than one child. It can range from name-calling to hiding another sibling's possession.¹ Whatever may be at the root of the situation, parents can find calming these squabbles a daunting challenge.

Fortunately, the experience of having a sibling also leads to beneficial outcomes, such as fostering the development of social skills and learning about boundaries and respectful relationships. For example, siblings learn how to deal with power struggles and to negotiate and compromise.¹ As they successfully negotiate a compromise, they can build self-esteem.² Learning to talk things out can also help develop debate skills that can enable a child to stand up for their beliefs to others, such as their peer group.²

Ultimately, they learn the valuable lesson that while they may have disagreements with people they love, a good relationship can still flourish.²

Of course, parents have a responsibility to protect their children, intervene when situations become dangerous, and coach children in these needed social skills. For example, there are times when one child needs protection from injury by another sibling, especially when sibling size or power is not equal. In sum, parents should intervene in situations involving physical aggression, emotional damage, or high-intensity interactions that seem to invite physical or emotional harm.

But, more than restoring the peace, parents can also establish a family culture that increases respect between children and reduces some of the tendency to quarrel and tease. Here are four effective, researched-based practices that can help:

Establish Rules and Consequences

Children need boundaries that help them understand what is acceptable and why. Create family rules that clearly establish how to manage conflict. For example, younger children may need a simple rule, such as "be kind." As they take a toy from another, a parent can inquire, "Do you think this is kind? How did it make your brother feel?" As children get older, they can learn about more specific boundaries in the family culture, such as "avoid interrupting," "ask before you borrow something from your sibling," or "compliment rather than criticize your siblings in front of your friends."

Explaining the reasoning behind the rules helps children see the purpose for the rule and recognize that it was established for their benefit. For example, a parent might explain to the children: "We want a safe environment for every family member. We've set the rule of no hitting to make sure this happens because when someone hits someone else, then they can both get hurt and feel unwelcome here."

Families can also establish consequences for not following those rules.¹ Parents can start with reminders when the rules are broken, but then when the violation is repeated, they can enforce the rules and follow through with the established consequences. Parents can mediate disputes by emphasizing the children's roles in explaining their actions, paying attention to one another's feelings, or finding solutions. For example, when I got into fights with my siblings, my mom would sit with us and ask us to explain to one another how we felt and why. We then worked together to brainstorm a solution. If we stubbornly would not agree, neither of us would get what we wanted, helping us learn that cooperation is more productive than unresolved, angry feelings.

Holding family meetings can be a great way to establish rules and consequences. Actively listening to each person can allow families to discuss problems and brainstorm solutions.² Children learn that they are a valuable part of this team and may be more invested in accomplishing family goals because they had a say in both the rules and the consequences. These measures can help prevent future

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fighting because problems that regularly crop up will have already been addressed at the family meeting.

Avoid Sibling Comparisons

Even when children are young, parents may be tempted to naturally compare children. Children may make comparisons between themselves and their siblings that can create resentment and strife, so parents have even more responsibility to set the example of avoiding comparisons. Acknowledging that every child is different and has unique capabilities allows you to keep realistic expectations for each child.⁴ Not every child has the same aptitude, and each child will be better at different things.⁴

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Distinguished professor of psychology Laura Berk states as children grow older and develop their individual personalities, parents may find themselves verbally comparing one child to another more often.³ Making comments such as “Why can’t you be more like your sister?” or “Your brother is so much better at listening and doing his chores” can be hurtful and cause resentment toward siblings.³ Even when parents try to hold their tongue about negative sibling comparisons, unspoken but unfavorable mental comparisons might come out in a side comment or action that can implicitly demonstrate those underlying attitudes and stir up emotions that result in more sibling conflict.

Berk also warns that the child who receives less recognition, parental affection, and appreciation might act out to gain attention.³ Though seemingly minor, those kinds of comments and actions have the power to influence siblings to compete for parental love.² By positively acknowledging a child’s effort and accomplishments, you can help reduce sibling rivalry caused by resentment and the desire to be recognized.²

Don’t Play Favorites

Of course, most parents don’t purposely set out to treat one child better than the other or give their children the impression they’re picking favorites. It just happens sometimes. Each child’s temperament is different, which may make some children easier to get along with than others.¹ Maybe a parent shares more similar interests with one child than another. Age differences mean that some children have more privileges than others.

Pediatric medical expert Renee Anushka Alli recognizes that the differences in privileges between siblings may come up⁴ because older siblings generally enjoy privileges that

younger siblings don’t, such as staying up later or going out with friends. Parents can remind younger children that this is a matter of maturity and responsibility, not favoritism. When the younger children are older and can handle more responsibility, they can also have more freedom like their older siblings. My mother explained this to my sister and me in easy-to-understand terms, helping us see that “fairness isn’t equal” and that in a family, we seek to “treat children differently in order to treat them fairly.”

These discussions can help children keep from believing that you have a favorite child.² But doing is also important. For example, pediatric psychologist Jennifer S. Pendley recommends that parents find ways to show children that their love for each of them is limitless.⁵ Actions tend to carry more influence in undoing a negative false perception. Parents can intentionally find ways to carve out one-on-one time for each individual child; this reinforces a child’s self-esteem, worth, and individuality.² Letting each child talk to you alone while giving them your full attention allows them to feel important and loved.⁴ For example, my mother and I both share similar interests



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in baking desserts, scrapbooking, and reading. My older sister’s interests are very different, but my mom creatively found many other ways to reach out and spend one-on-one time, such as getting ice cream or taking my sister on a drive. These small efforts had big results. This was my mother’s way to show she didn’t have a favorite. My sister felt that our mother cared about her and still has a very close relationship with her today. When she is not living at home, she calls our mom almost every day to talk to her.

Of course, there will be times when one child might need additional attention due to greater needs. Still, over the long term, an effort should be made to address the needs of your children differently. This can help children perceive an earnest concern for *all* the children in the family.

Encourage Sibling Time and Alone Time

Parents can also play a role in creating opportunities for activities that allow siblings to work together and have fun with each other. Activities that require collaboration can help children bond and see that some projects entail effort and contributions from everyone. Family work can help tie family members together.⁶ When your children work alongside each other, they form bonds, create memories, and strengthen their relationships with each other that can lead to less quarreling.⁴

While activities together can strengthen children's relationships, separate activities are equally valuable in the development of a child. Separate activities and playgroups can allow children to have a break from their siblings and make connections with friends of their own.² For example, if a family has twins or children close in age, parents might put those siblings in the same extracurricular activities because of convenience. Doing this could diminish those

children's perspective on their individuality and keep them from exploring interests of their own. When children have the ability to discover who they are, you allow them to gain more perspective about their self, their siblings, and others they may encounter.

Even at home, siblings may need some private space. Allowing your children to have their own personal niche can give your child a place to go when tensions get high. Of course, some siblings gain much from learning to share a bedroom, but even a dedicated corner of the playroom can help a child feel like they have their own space.² Even a toy specifically intended for one child can be beneficial. For example, my mom gave each of my siblings and me our own stuffed animal that no one else was allowed to play with without our permission. As a child, I loved having that toy all for myself and feeling that I had a special gift from my mom that no one else in the family had.

Applying these principles over time can help siblings have productive interactions that help them gain the many benefits available through being a sibling. The journey won't always be perfect or easy. But, with the courageous efforts of parents, children are more likely to learn what it can ultimately mean to be a sibling to another—having a loving, lifelong friend.

Photo by Annie Spratt on Unsplash

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Endnotes

- ¹ Coping with Sibling Rivalry. (n.d.). *Center for Parenting Education*. <https://centerforparentingeducation.org/library-of-articles/sibling-rivalry/coping-sibling-rivalry/>
- ² Borden, M. E. (2003). *The baffled parent's guide to sibling rivalry*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- ³ Berk, L. E. (2011). The family. In *Child Development* (9th ed., pp. 556–604). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- ⁴ Alli, R. A. (2020, February 8). Sibling rivalry and other sister-brother problems. *Web MD*. <https://www.webmd.com/parenting/sibling-rivalry#3>
- ⁵ Pendley, J. S. (Ed.). (2016, September). Sibling rivalry. *Kids Health*. <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/sibling-rivalry.html>
- ⁶ Bahr, K. S., & Loveless, C. A. (2000). Family work: The chores that bind us. *BYU Magazine*. <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/family-work/>

