

CONNECTING!

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Parents Leadership Institute's E-Mail Newsletter
Volume 2, Number 4 – May 21, 2002

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Success Story – My Sons Resolve a Dispute
News – * PLI PlayMorning in July for Parents and Children.
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Book Nook: “I Can Make My World A Safer Place” by Paul Kivel
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A fresh PLI Events Calendar (San Francisco Bay Area) can be found at
<http://www.parentleaders.org/Classes.html>

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SIBLING SOLUTIONS, Part 2

On April 1st, we published the first part of this article, which covered ideas on how to help prepare a child for a sibling, and how to reassure an older child after a new baby has arrived. It also discussed helping children when they become harsh with each other. If you want copies of that article, you can find the entire article on our website at www.parentleaders.org/Articles.html.

Notice What Goes Well!

Brothers and sisters want to get along! They want to have fun with each other. Often, we parents are so relieved to have things going well between our children that we don't notice the details of the generous and flexible moments between them. We use the times that go well between them to get our housework or phone calls or schoolwork done. If you look carefully, you'll see sharing, assistance, and thoughtfulness at moments and in places you hadn't noticed before. Sometimes, these moments of brotherly and sisterly genius take place a split-second before the relationship deteriorates into a tangle. In spite of what follows, those few seconds were an effort, and an achievement. Your appreciation of the positive is a help to your children's relationship. "Jacquie, thanks for bringing your sister the brush. Now can you let her do her hair herself?" helps a child

feel seen. Her effort to help is real, even if her follow-through leaves something to be desired.

What About the Disputes?

In every family, pesky feelings of frustration and competition for attention and for toys disturb siblings' good intentions sooner or later. When there's a tug-of-war over you, or over a desired thing, you can help your children by listening the feelings through. Children can tolerate necessary unfairness (Daddy isn't going to give Sally the hammer because she could easily hurt herself, but Kenny can handle it) as long as the feelings of frustration or insult are **heard**. Feelings that are listened to all the way through are feelings that evaporate afterward. When you listen to crying or frustration, the child lets the awful feeling out, and your attention and caring then flow in. So siblings can get back to loving each other, even when you can't give them the same experiences, or the same amounts, or the same time, or the same toys.

A Policy That Reduces Tension Over Time

The policy I like best about disputed items is that the child who has the item gets to keep it until he's done. Meanwhile, the parent "helps the other child wait" by making sure he is gently held if he tries to grab. The parent listens to the child's upset while he feels like he's NEVER going to get his turn. The crying or tantrum drains the "I'm a victim" feelings, the "I never get what I want" feelings, and the "It isn't fair" feelings that often infect a sibling relationship, and turn it into a real power contest every day. All the parent needs to do is to listen to the feelings, and to keep giving the reassurance that "You'll get a turn. He won't keep the red bike forever."

As you'll see, the "unfairness" of Jasmine getting to the puzzle first today will let Jacquie work on her upsets, and Jacquie getting to the swing first tomorrow will let Jasmine work on her upsets. Cry by cry, both children have a chance to have your company and closeness while they work out their upsets about the other. Gradually, over time, this helps siblings develop patience and trust that, even if they can't have what they want right now, they are loved and will get a turn later. You have children who love each other, and by listening, you're helping them move big chunks of negative feelings out of the way of that love. The fun will follow.

When both children are pulling hard on the same item, an unusual but very effective strategy is to put your hand on the desired item, too, and say, "I'm sure you can figure out how to share this. I'm not going to let either of you grab it right now. You can figure this out." Lots of crying and heated feelings will follow, and when one or the other child has cried enough to think clearly, a solution will appear. One child will decide to wait, or they'll begin negotiating with each other. It's SO difficult to resist clamping a solution onto the problem right away! But allowing them to cry hard about their heated wants will make cooperation far more likely. And you won't be required to "keep the peace" between them, once they've cried enough to come to their own solution.

We adults have been trained to try to solve the dispute quickly so the feelings will subside. It's an emotional challenge for us to take the unusual tack that the feelings are the real issue, not the disputed item. When we listen instead of legislating turns, we bring our children some moments to feel loved while they feel sad or angry. This love and reassurance while they are upset sticks with them far longer than the 5 minutes of (usually defensive) fun with the toy, after which they are tense again over when they will get their next 5 minutes.

An Ounce of Prevention

Another important strategy for parents of siblings is to notice what the likely “fight times” are. Sometimes it’s car rides, sometimes it’s during before-dinner play, sometimes it’s when you’ve left them in a room together for more than 5 minutes. You know very well the patterns of upset they’ve developed.

We parents find ourselves upset and frustrated at our children when they fight, even when we know EXACTLY when they always fight. We are better at keeping a level head if we give up hoping (beyond realistic hope) that a fight won't erupt. In a way, our own hopes can be as irrational as our children's fights. When their "gas gauge" is nearing empty, it's time to put in more attention. YOU are the one who can plump up their capacity for tolerance. They depend on their sense of connection with you for the well-being of their relationship with each other.

For instance, if your children traditionally get into trouble with each other right after you bring them home in the evening, try getting down on the floor to play with them right when you walk in the door, to re-establish your connection with each of them. You may need to have carrot sticks and peanut butter as car food on the way home, to handle the immediate hunger problem, so that dinner can be cooked AFTER playful connections have been made. Games like, "I have 10 kisses for each of you" can turn into contests that bring lots of laughter and reassurance after a day of being separated. Sometimes, children will work together to "keep you away," strengthening their bond as the powerful and clever children who can evade the kisses of the bumbling but determined parent.

This article on siblings will end with thoughts on what to do when siblings have already hurt each other in our July 15th issue.

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Parent Success Story:

My Sons Diffuse a Dispute

My sons both loved music, and had their favorite songs they liked to play. One day, I came running when I heard screaming in their playroom. The music was on very high volume. I asked what the matter was, and they each told me the way he wanted the

volume. One wanted it high, and the other wanted it low. They both were pretty passionate about having it their way.

I wasn't sure how to help them, but I decided to see what would happen if they each had their way for a little while. I thought that if they could work out their feelings, then they would be able to come to some kind of agreement. So I said, "I think you can work this out between you. But first, I'm going to let you each see how the other one wants it. Jared, I'm going to turn the volume down, so Derrick has it his way for a little while." I turned the volume down, and Derrick stopped crying, but Jared cried hard. He wanted me to turn it up immediately! I said, "No, I'll turn it up in a couple of minutes." But I kept looking at him as lovingly as I could while he cried, so he wouldn't think I was punishing him. After a few minutes of Jared feeling totally undone, I said to Derrick, "OK, now, we're going to try it Jared's way for a few minutes. Here goes!" I turned the volume up. I stayed close and held Derrick while he cried and covered his ears. In my mind, I sided with Derrick, but the volume wasn't so bad that it hurt, so I let it be. Jared stopped crying, of course, and stood there listening intently. After a couple of minutes of Derrick crying and feeling like he couldn't stand the noise, I changed the volume again. I gave my attention to the one who felt awful. I think it took about three turns of two or three minutes each for them to scream and cry. Finally, when I turned the volume down, Jared didn't cry any longer. I asked him, "Is this OK now?" and he said, "Yes." So I turned it up, and after a bit more of a cry, Derrick stopped and could stand to hear it loud at last. The emotions were taken care of, and I said, "OK, you guys. You can figure out where you want the volume now. You did a good job!" And I didn't have to control the volume any longer. They just fixed it and listened to their tape! --a mother in Palo Alto.

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Please send your stories of how you've used the PLI approach to parenting. We'd love to hear about what you've learned, and to share it with other parents.

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NEWS

** PLI is offering a PlayMorning every other month: our next one is on Saturday, July 20th. Parents who have had some introduction to the PLI approach, and their children 6 years and under, are welcome. We also welcome parents of older children, and people who work with parents and children, to attend. We play hard (pillowfights and chasing are big with the older children), make sure each child gets Special Time with his or her parent, and get Playlistening going when we can. Often, children find ways to let big feelings bubble to the surface after an hour or so of play and attention, and we mentor parents as they listen to the feelings and help their children work them through. It's a place where it's safe for your child to be himself, and where every parent gets listened to at some time during the morning. Join us! For details, see our events calendar at www.parentleaders.org.

** Patty Wipfler will give a talk on Raising Confident and Caring Children in Somerville, Massachusetts, Monday, June 10th. Further details are in the Events Schedule, www.parentleaders.org/Classes/html

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BOOK NOOK

“I Can Make My World A Safer Place: A Kid’s Book About Stopping Violence,” by Paul Kivel. Hunter House Publishers, Alameda, California, 2001 (order at ordering@hunterhouse.com)

This is a book for children in elementary school: it’s full of illustrations, short exercises, and bite-sized information for children who face bullying, intimidation, anger, fights, gang activity, or similar troubles in their young lives. It encourages children to understand their options, to ask for help, and to think about their reactions. If you’re a parent trying to help your child with these kinds of difficult situations, this book would be a good tool to help you work together with your child toward responses and solutions that work. --Patty Wipfler

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Parents Leadership Institute is a non-profit organization that fosters healthy parent-child relationships that last a lifetime.

We give parents simple, concrete tools to build and rebuild a close relationship with their children, and to lead their families well. We promote parent-to-parent support founded on mutual respect, listening, and the desire of parents to love children well.

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