

Sibling Rivalry: Some Solutions

by Patty Wipfler

Raising one child is challenging in our fast-paced and adult-oriented society. Raising more than one child brings added joys, and often, difficult feelings that start with the older child and eventually infect the younger child too.

Those feelings of sibling rivalry can be lifted by a few important strategies which, employed early and often, can clear the way for rich, playful, and loving relationships between children. Since these strategies are not the typical, “Don’t do that or I’ll send you to your room” approach, they are challenging to use. But the results they bring over time are deeply rewarding.

Preparation for a brother or sister



Every child has longings for more time and more closeness with their parents! These longings are a big part of why it’s hard to want to go to bed at night, hard to get dressed to go to day care or to Grandma’s, and why it can even be upsetting to see Mommy or

Daddy cuddling or talking on the telephone! Every child needs a chance to air his feelings about wanting more, indeed, about wanting *all* your time and attention.

A good way to help your child has two seemingly opposite steps. The first is to **offer him Special Time** during which you pour on your attention, your approval, and your closeness. You allow your child to choose what play he wants to do with you.

You can start Special Time by saying expectantly, “OK, we have fifteen minutes, and I’ll play with you any way you want to!” with a lively tone. Then, keep your attention focused on your child. Let the phone ring, and postpone your need to get a cup of tea during this time.

It’s surprisingly hard to do for us—because parenting is stressful, we almost always try to teach, try to direct, or try to get little jobs done while we’re playing with our children! What Special Time does is to help your child, and you, too, notice that you are paying loving attention and letting him make decisions for awhile.

The second important step is to **notice when your child longs for exclusive closeness** with you. Is it when new people are around? Is it when you both arrive at day care or at the grandparents’ house? Is it at bedtime, with pleas for story after story to keep you close?

When a child feels upset about a possible separation, however minor it may be, his feelings of needing you are ready to be released. He needs the reassurance that you love him and the chance to cry as long as possible to drain the reservoir of sadness about you going.

He can best do that with you close, telling him: “I’m going to leave, but I’ll come back. I’ll always come back to you.” Or, in the case of bedtime: “You’re safe here. I’ll be in the next room, and I’ll see you in the morning.” (See our article: “Healing the Hurt of Separation”) If your child feels safe enough, he or she will cry, and the listening you do will help heal that feeling of never having enough of you.

These two steps, repeated over time, help prepare a child for the challenge of a sibling’s demands on your attention.

Playfully reassure the older child

After a new sibling has arrived, an older child’s feelings will be both large with love and wonder, and tight with upset about his sibling’s intrusion into his relationship and time with you. **One of the more fruitful ways to handle this is to find a way to play “I want you!” with your older child as often as possible.**

“I want you” games come in a hundred variations. You could begin by getting down on the floor and announcing, “I have a hundred kisses for you! Where shall I start?!” and

crawling awkwardly toward your child. You can make great efforts to get him and cuddle him, and then he can wriggle away and dance just out of reach, laughing while you try to deliver your kisses.

Or play can be set up with both parents, one parent playfully pulling the child toward her and saying, "I want to play with Sam!" and the other pulling him back and saying, "No, you can't have him! I haven't had enough of him yet today!" If this playful tug-of-war brings laughter, keep playing! It fills up a child's hunger for attention and importance.

Another "I want you" game is to announce, "Where's Sam!? I have to find Sam! I'm lonesome for Sam!" and to search all around (even though Sam is in plain sight) until you discover him and scoop him up in your arms for lots of cuddles. Holding your older child like a baby, and appreciating his fingers, toes, perfect ears, and beautiful eyes is another kind of sweet play that reassures a child that his uniqueness hasn't been forgotten.

The laughter your child does while you playfully show that you can't live without him heals some of the hurt of seeing you attending the other child so often and so lovingly. And it gives you a delightful way to openly appreciate your older child.

Special Time will also help you center your attention on your older child at regular intervals during the week, helping both him and you to plump up your relationship and remember the love you have for each other.

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.

When your child needs you and you can't help right away

When children cry for more closeness, or get upset because you can't help them right away, we have an excellent chance to help them to fully release the sadness they feel. When your older child feels needy, you can send him an invitation to be close.

A loving look or a tender word, an invitation to come and snuggle your back or sit on your feet or be embraced by your one free arm says, "I want to help" even when you can't.

If your child begins to tantrum or cry, an excellent thing is happening! He's using the offer of closeness that you gave as the sweetness he needed to begin to release his pent-up feelings of upset. Sometimes children "work on" their feelings of helplessness, too, and feel like they *can't* walk over to you.

After they've cried a while, they'll rediscover their ability to walk again, and will have worked through some outdated feelings that were making them whiny and hard to live with.

Crying and tantrums heal the hurt, although by all appearances, your child feels worse than ever while it's happening. If you keep offering loving words and gentle looks while he works his feelings through, he'll feel closer to you and much relieved when he's done, and he won't be blaming his unhappiness on his sibling. His unhappiness will have been scrubbed away by the heartfelt emotional work he just did.

Key to this strategy is your **understanding that your love is enough**, even when you can't help right away. Your attention during an explosion of feelings (even from the other side of the room) is noticed by your child. Your voice and your eyes will convey your caring, and help to right the wrongs that your child is feeling.

You are not neglecting him, nor are you causing more pain. While you patiently listen to a crying or tantruming child, you are doing a good job as a parent, and your child is doing a good job of getting rid of the bad feelings he doesn't want to live with.

What about the sibling rivalry 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



Photo courtesy of Jason Pergament

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 five minutes of (usually defensive) fun with the toy, after which they are tense again over when they will get their next five minutes.

Here's how this can work:

My sons both love music, and have their favorite songs they like to play. One day, I came running when I heard screaming in their playroom. The music was on at a very high volume. I asked what the matter was, and each of them was frantic about the way he wanted the volume. One wanted it high, and the other wanted it low. They were both crying and screaming.

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!

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, and sometimes it’s when you’ve left them in a room together for more than five 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 wellbeing 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 ten kisses for each of you” or [The Vigorous Snuggle](#) 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 their bumbling but determined parent.

Here's the story of one father who prepared himself mentally, and the good results he got from the listening he was able to do because he was ready for "trouble."

My son, who is older, and daughter were sitting at the table. It was dinnertime, and my son almost always finds a way to get upset with his sister at dinner! I prepared myself mentally beforehand, telling myself that their fight was going to happen, and that I could intervene without getting angry.

I sat my son right next to my daughter, instead of sitting between them—which I often do to try to keep a fight from happening. We hold hands before a meal, and take a moment to give thanks. So I said, "OK, let's hold hands." My son immediately protested. I said, as gently as I could. "Come on, hold her hand now." That's all it took to get them going.

My son said, "Don't force me!" And I said, "I'm not forcing you, but it would be good to hold your sister's hand." I didn't make him do it, but I didn't give up on the idea that he could do it. He began to cry, and ran from the table. I followed after him into the next room, and he cried, saying that how his sister always hurts him and teases him and kicks him. I kept quiet about the things I know he does to her, and didn't argue at all, just listened to the wrongs he felt.

He cried for a long time. He didn't come back to the table a completely loving brother, but later that night, I heard him talking to her very sweetly, saying, "Do you want me to pick you up? Want me to carry you?" Normally he doesn't want to get physically close to her at all. And as I do more of this listening, I see that they're starting to play together more, and he's hugging her sometimes. It's unbelievable, actually! I'm really excited that things are loosening up between them.

It's a real challenge for us, because we are so tired of their fights and their attitudes toward each other. It's hard to be kind and gentle when the fights begin. But we're getting the payoff, bit by bit.

When one sibling is harsh toward another



Children who touch too roughly, or hug too tightly, or hit or poke or hurt their siblings are sending clear signals that they have some upsets that need to be listened to. Even very young children can be gentle with younger ones, as long as they are feeling “filled up” with attention, and relaxed.

So any sign of harshness from one sibling to another can be taken as a sign that the child is not feeling connected or relaxed enough to function thoughtfully.

When you notice that a child has been rough, scolding him or ordering him to do things correctly won't help. This only frightens your child more, and makes it less likely that he'll be able to act thoughtfully.

What does help is to move in quickly and gently. Very gently but firmly stop the tense child from touching the younger child, but don't remove him. Say, “I'll help you be next to Sammy,” and guide his hands or his kisses so that they land softly, Move so that you can make eye contact with the older child, and invite him kindly to take a look at you.

Usually, because the child is tense with upset, he can't look at you for long, and when he tries, the upset begins to make him want to go away. Gently stay with him and keep him close, continuing to let him feel your attention and your support.

Usually, the child will move rather quickly into a tantrum or a big cry about wanting you or not wanting you, or about wanting to touch the baby, or not wanting the baby. All those feelings are important facets of the nugget of upset he's trying to offload. If you stay with him, without criticism, he'll be able to cry or tantrum it through.

When our children hurt each other, we need help ourselves

Seeing one sibling hurt another is one of the most trying times in our lives as parents. It makes us feel like we aren't succeeding at the really important part of parenting. And often, it sets us up to be harsh toward the child who did the hurting, even though we love that child deeply.

Sometimes, when the hurting has become frequent, almost habitual, sibling troubles infect the way all the members of the family feel all of the time. As hard as these times are for us, we need to keep the perspective that they happen in just about every family.

Perhaps we'll come to a time in human history when life is so gentle that sibling aggression is rarer, but we're not there yet. One difficulty we have in finding good ways out of sibling tangles, little or big, is that we parents generally haven't seen parents handle sibling difficulties without harshness. It feels like harshness is necessary, even justified, to get the aggression to stop. But if we reason things through, it's hard to see how harshness from a grownup could beget love and tenderness between children. There must be a better answer.

And there is, but it's not easy. I think the most effective answer lies off the beaten path of a parent's life. Since it works so well, here goes.

When our children begin to fight and it creates upset in the family, it's time for the parent looking for a solution to find a listener. Parents with fighting siblings get upset. Upset people don't solve people problems well.

We have to be able to win the hearts of our children back to us, before they can love each other well again. And to win a child's heart, a grownup needs to shed his doubts about the goodness of the child. When our children fight, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that they are good children.

When they fight, at least one of them is experiencing a blackout in his thinking. He hasn't stopped being a good person, he's just stopped thinking. It happens to us every day too. For example, when our children fight, we often stop thinking.

So a good first move is to find someone who can, without interruption, judgment, or advice, listen to you talk about the child who gets lost in upset.

Some of the things to talk about are:

What was it like for you and that child when he was born?

When he was an infant?

What was the last time you really felt close to him? Enjoyed him?

What do you feel like doing when he hurts his sibling? What do you do?

What would have happened to you if you had acted like he does when you were a child?

What do you worry about?

What hurts you or angers you when you see your children fighting?

Telling someone about each of these threads of experience and feeling will help. If you can show some of the feelings that arise, all the better. The feelings are sitting there, waiting for release.

Sometimes, it helps to talk about the situation several times. Don't make your children listen to the stories you have. They are best saved for other adults.

When hurt has already happened

When you haven't been able to get to your children in time to prevent blows from falling, you usually have one who is hurt and crying, and one who seems remote, uncaring, and defensive. And, truth be told, you usually have at least one really angry parent on hand, too!

First, make sure no more harm can come. Separate the warring parties, so kicks can't land and pinches flail in the air. You don't have to move them into separate rooms, just put a foot or two of space between them.

Second, odd as it may seem, apologize. "I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner. I didn't know you were getting upset," goes a long way toward thawing out the child who did the hurting.

When a child has hurt someone, he feels very badly about himself. But this doesn't show at all—externally, this child is cool. He may say he doesn't care, and he tries to mean it.

But actually, *children don't really want to hurt anyone*. They are as mystified as you are about what makes them do these things. They feel guilty, and guilt paves over a person's ability to feel anything. Guilt is like a heavy cement cover on the sadness and fears underneath the surface.

When you apologize for not getting there in time to prevent harm, it helps move the guilt away from the aggressor child. With less guilt sitting on him, he'll be able to cry with you much sooner about the underlying feelings that drove him toward such hurtful behavior.

Your child is good



Sooner or later, every child with siblings gets upset with his brother or sister. But try to keep a good perspective: even when consumed with big feelings, your child is good. He's signaling you for help as clearly and as vigorously as he knows how.

You may need some listening time from another adult to remember his goodness. Once your own upset isn't throbbing, you'll again be able to spend one-on-one time with him, a good first step toward healing his aching heart.