



connecting through chaos: what to do when siblings have big feelings at the same time

What parent hasn't wished she could clone herself into an army of expert cuddlers, caregivers, lap holders, child carriers, diaper changers, housekeepers and taskmasters? How many times can we say, "There is only one of me"? We want to love, nurture and connect with our children, while at the same time supporting their healthy development, and also managing our responsibilities of putting the groceries away, cooking dinner, living in an organized house, maintaining relationships with the neighbors, driving the kids around... the list goes on. How can there ever be enough of us to go around?

We are particularly likely to feel less than enough when big upsets are happening with more than one child at the same time. Children are passionate people, and getting their upset out of the way is not only a natural process but also smart and healthy. When a child has an upset, his brain is out of equilibrium. Feelings have flooded his limbic system sending signals to tell the thinking part of the brain, "It's time to take a break." A child can get back into balance by offloading that hurt through crying, tantrums, trembling, perspiring, or laughing. Parents can support the child's natural process by moving in and listening to him with our full attention and warmth. We show the child through our body language and a few words ("I'm right here," or "You can still have a good day") that we know he is good and we trust his process. This is called Staylistening.

If a child cannot offload his feelings, his behavior can go off-track in an attempt to signal that he cannot think. An off-track child may push his brother or throw things across the room. It's best to intervene early, when his emotions are still on the surface. If the child cannot unload until after damage has been done, he may act cold and uncaring or cover his big feelings with guilt and defensiveness, making it more difficult to reach them.



Parenting is a hard job; ideally, there would always be other adults or extended families around, so that when multiple children are crying, there's a caring adult available to respect the child's right to cry and to listen to him so he can get back to himself. But, for many parents, that's not the reality. When you're dealing with two or more





disconnected kids, give yourself a gentle reminder that your best will just have to be good enough and that perfection may be unattainable.

Here are a few ideas that might be helpful when several children are letting their hurt pour out and it feels like chaos has broken loose. Be approachable, with extra servings of patience and warmth—and keep in mind that it's never easy.

1. Listen and be safety manager. When a child's limbic system gets flooded with emotions, he cannot think well about himself or others around him. He has no impulse control; he may take his brother's toy without any provocation. He cannot remember that you love him; he may lash out.

Stay close. Make sure everyone is safe. If you have a child who typically lashes out, be ready. Use pillows or cushions to separate your children, or sit between them. Leave room for flailing arms and legs, and for flying shoes.

Who needs to be listened to first? (For sibling squabbles, please read *Sibling Rivalry: Some Solutions*, and *Siblings Fighting: When You Get There Too Late*). A child who is physically hurt may need attention first. A tantrum caused by frustration can probably wait a few moments. Though a tantruming child can move wildly, he typically won't hurt anyone, though it is still wise to keep an eye out to make sure he doesn't hurt himself. However, a tantrum that has gone on for over 15 minutes indicates that the child is working on heavy feelings in his emotional memory and needs a big dose of your warmth and attention.

When you've figured out who needs you first, remember to bring your warmth with you. Spend some attentive moments, then move on to another child: say something like, "I'm going to listen to Johnny now. You are safe here and I will come back to you in a few moments."

2. Take turns Staylistening with each child. Pouring in attention and warmth while a child's feelings are pouring out is very effective. When there is one of you and many hurt children, it's a juggling act. But when you approach the situation with openness and connection, you are partnering with your children rather than creating a power struggle. Trust and safety build within family relationships, stress diminishes, and the family can relax better with one another.

When listening to one child, try to let the other child know that you care by putting a hand on him, or tell him that you'll get to him soon. For instance, "I'm listening to Joey right now. I will listen to you in two minutes."

Don't become entangled in the facts of who did what to whom. Instead, focus on each child's emotional healing process and on connecting with each of them. They just need your attention; they don't need you to fix everything. When the children can think again, they will likely come up with wise and clever solutions, even for substantial issues like sharing, exclusion, or fairness.

Patty Wipfler, the founder of Hand in Hand, says, "Bring them close, pay attention to them one at a time, for a minute or two each, and if you have to cry along with them while doing your best to love them each and all, that's okay. Staying and crying is probably better for them than getting up and running away. Calling someone while you're in the middle of it, and having a listener for a few minutes, is also okay. It's not easy."

Here is a story that demonstrates what this looked like in one family:

My children's father, who had a history of cancer, needed to go to the emergency room, and he needed me to pick up our children from there. I canceled my plans for the day, giving myself space and time, and during the drive I prepared myself to stay calm and present with my children. At the hospital, my kids were watching TV and seemed fine, but I knew that underneath they were probably scared about their dad. Indeed, within 5



minutes, my daughter started kicking my son. I created a game with my children that helped separate them and stop the kicking, and then I worked with each of them individually as they fell apart. Both of my children started crying about the terrible day they were having, about how dad had ruined their day.

I would spend a couple minutes with my daughter and then say, "I'm going to check in with your brother now and be back with you in a few minutes." For about 60 minutes, I went back and forth, and my children both released a good wad of fear about their father. The three of us left the hospital relaxed, arm in arm. The rest of our day was enjoyable, and we had some helpful conversations about what daddy was going through.

It's also good to realize we don't really have control over when our kids offload their feelings. With our full and stressful lives, we would like to have a schedule for this, but we cannot. Sometimes the best response is just to let go of control, as this mother did:

After a long day out, I drove home with my daughter and with the 4- month-old baby I was babysitting. The baby slept well during the drive, but, when we arrived, awoke quite hungry and started to fuss. My daughter was very tired from being outside in the sun all day and said she didn't have the energy to walk up to our third floor apartment. In addition to the baby, I had a lot of other stuff to carry up the stairs, and I couldn't carry my daughter too. Still, I decided I wanted to be inside my home if things were going to fall apart.

My daughter fell into deep sobs, and I gently came over to her and said, "Sweetheart, I will listen to you when we get upstairs." She cried harder. I said, "I will keep an eye on you." I carried the baby and a few loads of stuff upstairs, then came back to get my daughter, who needed lots of support.

Once everything and everyone was inside the house, I was exhausted; the only thing I could do was fall on the floor and admit this was not enjoyable and out of my control. I made a bottle for the baby, sat on the floor, and snuggled the baby on my lap. My daughter scooched right next to me, and I put an arm around her. I listened to her cry about how much work her day was and that I only paid attention to the baby.

I was so happy she was getting this out of her. Giving up control was really helpful in that moment. It connected us so my daughter could feel safe enough to tell me her woes. After everyone (including me) had had a good cry, my daughter played wholeheartedly with the baby as I put away the stuff from our day.

3. Anticipate and plan for emotional upsets. Watch for patterns of upset such as particular times of day or transitions. Do your children get into tussles when it's time to drive somewhere? At the dinner table, do your children kick each other under the table? Anticipating off-track behavior patterns and then focusing on the emotional tension can help resolve these challenging times.

For example, suppose your children have been kicking each other under the table daily for the last several weeks. Rather than holding onto the false hope that it won't happen again, *expect* it to happen again, and try to plan around it. The dinner table is a common time for offloading feelings because, there, kids are with safe adults, and they feel the sense of family and community. Kids often save their offloading for such safe spaces. So, instead of just waiting for the kicking to happen, try to create a safe space *before* the meal. Do a 10- minute family wrestle or pillow fight before coming to the





Once the day's tensions have run off, mealtime can start off with laughter and connection.

Another typical rough patch is arriving home after school. The fights are predictable: sister took up brother's space in the car; brother sang too loudly; brother had his feet on sister's backpack. The real issue here is that the children had a busy day and need to offload their tensions before they can feel close to you and to each other again. If you can anticipate this, you can offer a few vigorous cuddles before they get into the car, or schedule some Special Time with each child as soon as they come home. (Special Time is a set amount of time you spend with your child, doing whatever that child wants with 100% of your attention and delight. It's a great tool for refreshing your connection—even five minutes can make a big difference!)

4. Laughter is a powerful connector. Playlistening—playing in a way that follows children's laughter—can relax tense situation and release the emotions that are causing off track behavior. I use Playlistening often, especially if I catch both of my kids going off track at the same time. Here's a story from another parent who used this technique:

My two children were both lying in the living room in a sunny spot. The sunny spot started to shrink, and soon they were touching each other, which turned into kicking. They both disliked the invasion of their space. So I lay between them and started singing, "Stop...in the name of love! I don't like you touching me." They started to giggle. Soon, both of them were singing along. "Stop it NOW... OW... OW!" We were all laughing and gesturing along with the song. The sunny spot was completely forgotten, because we were connected, and both my kids had my attention.

5. Get support. Parenting is very intense and difficult work, and parents need to be listened to. We need to talk about what is challenging, what is hard, where we have our back up against the wall. Our children's emotional upsets can re-stimulate old hurts of our own. Stored feelings from a time we were hurt by our own siblings, or needed attention and couldn't get it, can pop up and leave us feeling angry, hurt, isolated, and distracted from our own children. Getting regular listening time can help prevent these moments from making us overwhelmed or shutting us down.

For example, when children's emotions escalate each other and all the children are "off" at the same time, it can feel unfair—like being ganged up on. If this situation often triggers strong feelings for you, ask yourself the question, "Did I ever feel ganged up on as a child?" Let those moments roll around in your mind. What feelings come up? Listen to yourself, but also, find someone else who can listen to you.

Find someone to listen—a listening partner—who won't interrupt you, judge you, give you advice, or try to fix you. You aren't broken. You just need support for the hard work of parenting. For more on Listening Partnerships, see Hand in Hand's [booklet](#), or our self-guided video course, [Building a Listening Partnership: Easing the Stress of Parenting](#).

6. Recognize that it may take time. Your children want you close to them, with your full attention—and when they are off-track, they can't think well enough to recognize that someone else needs your help too. You can give them your presence and your full attention, but because there's only one of you and more than one of them, it may take more time. Let yourself take that time.

It would be great if each child always had one-on-one adult attention, but often that just isn't available. In those situations, focusing on connection—limits, yes, but connection first and foremost—pays off in a big way. Not only will you get through those stressful moments with grace and calm, but you will see your family become more relaxed, more flexible, and more connected.

— Parenting by Connection Instructor [Kristen Volk](#)



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