

# Conscious Creative Courageous LIVING WITH CHILDREN

## Help for sibling rivalry

*These guidelines encourage ways to avoid sibling fights and rivalry in the first place but also give strategies for dealing with rivalry when it is occurring often.*

### Taking preventative action

1. **Try to conscientiously meet the basic needs** of the children for sleep, food, protection from overstimulation, for safety, love and attention.

2. **Clarify your family values** right from when the children are small, and work on affirming these values. For example, here are the stated values of one family:

In this family:

- We feel safe to be ourselves, but that doesn't mean we can hurt others.
- We care for each other (even if we don't always *feel* very caring when we are angry).
- We respect each other and can expect respect from each other.
- Our mother and father love each of us in a very special way that is just our own.
- We know that our "sacred time" (when a parent and child have special time alone together) is really important for us both.
- Love in our house has no limit. The more we give it away, the more we are given in return.
- We like being able to be authentically ourselves; that means we can be as different or as alike as we want to be.
- We value our differences and appreciate the way they all bring richness into our family.
- We can be generous in this family and let one person have more sometimes, because in the end our parents give us what we need when we need it. We can remind our parents, politely, if they forget to give us what we need and that is okay.
- We *try* to be compassionate and

understanding when others are tired or sick or grumpy etc.

- We know that in a strength there can be weakness, and in a weakness there can be strength.
- We listen to our feelings as wise messengers, but we don't let them boss us about.
- We can find ourselves a quiet place to recover our good feelings.
- We can enjoy doing something by ourselves sometimes.

3. **Be clear** with younger children **about rules** and get your older children to discuss and agree on your household rules for friendly (and unfriendly!) wrangling. E.g. no psychological hurting (e.g. no put-downs) or physical hurting (be specific- no hair pulling, no biting etc) or safety rules for physical wrangling (e.g. no shoes, only in "safe" areas.)

4. Recognise (and rejoice in!) the reality that **play fighting is a natural process**, where physical, intellectual and emotional skills are refined and strengthened. Learn what action can be helpful when these processes get out of hand (when angry feelings hook into each other and are looking for release regardless of the costs). It can be a valuable life skill to learn to fight fairly and also to not let squabbling get out of control and become hurtful. However, these skills do not come easily, and we adults need to show great self restraint if we are not to model undesirable behaviours in our own arguments! Children learn best when *we model* ways of releasing anger and other strong feelings, of

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problem solving, for cooperative living and of dealing with conflict in positive ways.

**5. Reward a child when he/she has been positive** in reactions to a sibling.

**6. Encourage cooperation.** Pick the best matched team for a good game!

**7. Avoid using competitive language** (e.g. who'll be first?) and avoid encouraging competition between siblings. Avoid comparisons ("you are the best, the worst, the quickest, the wittiest.") Instead directly describe the behaviour. ("You did that well.")

**8. Avoid comparing** one child with another. Value them as individuals and stick to that. Don't be drawn into comparisons by them. ("Who is better..?")

**9. Don't be drawn into everything having to be equal and the same.** Help them to see that they are not the same, and that nor would they want to be. For example, sometimes the oldest gets to do something because he or she is the oldest. Sometimes the youngest gets to go first because he or she is the youngest. Make clear to your children you try to meet their needs as best you can. If it comes to dividing anything (like food) equally **let one of them do it and let the others choose first** (an old boarding school trick).

**10. Encourage competence in many areas.** Give your children a wide range of experiences and skills in many fields, intellectual, creative, physical, etc., rather than letting them specialise or see themselves as "expert" in one broad field too soon. When children are competent in many areas they are more likely to be generous with siblings. They are more likely to be able to accept one child's special giftedness. Hopefully then it will not be "He's good at sport, so I'll be good at school work or music" but rather "He's good at football, violin and algebra and I love

volleyball, the flute and applied maths". This will help children develop an identity that includes every aspect of themselves, including things like being a good friend, or courageous or helpful, and isn't restricted to a single skill.

**11. Give children a "sacred time" with you** (one to one) which is valued and respected by the adult. Acknowledgement of the child's need for this and even a short time together can help a lot. ("Since the baby was born, I've really missed our special times together"). Turn your phone off in sacred time.

**12. Offer them plenty of creative challenges in their lives.** Boredom brings out the worst in a child tempted to taunt siblings. Beware the times when "boredom" (probably more accurately, a dulled sense of initiative) sets in after passive entertainment like screen time, or computer games (with their carefully managed external rewards.) Dammed up energy and irritability are also likely to burst out at these times. Healthy physical or creative activities especially out in nature can help bring back an equilibrium more conducive to sibling harmony!

**13. Recognise the bad times for fighting** and manipulate time and space! Find out their customary limits to being able to be together peacefully, then try to separate them before the limit is reached. Plan for them to be apart at their most tired, stressed times— plan for parent company, or to be engaged in separate activities, or one of them to be out of the house. Arrange for them to do things, chores, bathroom tasks etc. at different times.

**14. Arrange that each child has a space of their own to retire to.** Help each child build up individual interests that they can happily do on their own or at an arranged time with a parent.



## Strategies for the times when there has been a lot of fighting

1. **Consider long range planning** especially when there is consistent disturbance of one child by another. Perhaps arrange time apart for one child with other people.
2. **Let older children plan with you** or an outside person how they can do better, drawing up rules and charts etc.
3. **Ask yourself (and older children?) why** it is that fighting has become a favourite activity without much healthy creative play together to compensate. Separate the children as much as possible while new strategies are put in place (e.g. each child being given "sacred time" by a

## Strategies for dealing with actual fights or arguments

1. **Don't rush in!** Keep your centre! Take a deep breath or count to ten.
2. **Don't reward** the fighting with your obvious attention and emotional involvement. Turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to as much squabbling as you can, if safety is not an issue. Test for 'attention' being what they need. If you have a sense that they are looking for an audience, banish them, or remove yourself for a while. If attention does seem to be the desired outcome, prevent further fights by creating more times to give them attention in healthy ways, especially in one to one times.
3. **Don't take sides.** This creates a winner.
4. **Uphold your family guidelines, respect for others.** You have a right to peace too. Whether they are worse with an audience or not, you can let them choose between peace or banishment. Older children who have been taught respectful ways to disagree can continue their argument elsewhere. Remember the limitations on self-control with certain developmental stages here, especially with Older Twos, Fours, Older Five/Younger Sixes and Elevens). Some ages *like*

parent regularly.)

4. **Give them work for the 'will'**, like digging, carrying wood, kneading dough even regular pillow or balloon fights (within safe guidelines) to help drain the tension if siblings fight a lot. If you join in with a sense of humour, laughter can ease the tension.
5. **Consider inviting a friend over for each child**, but encourage separate play if cooperation has been poor, or if "ganging up" is likely. Avoid having only *one* friend over — this can set the stage for competition between siblings.

to stir things up. Read the *Development profiles* for your children to be forewarned.

5. **If you can see the signs of a squabble coming, divert them** to something more interesting and innocent (especially young ones). With older ones you might sometimes be more direct. ("You two seem to be getting a bit irritable with each other, are you going to be able to manage your tempers or would it be better to do something else. Is there anything that would help?")
6. **With fighting older children, sit down with them and share your concerns**, being straight to the point about issues of physical or psychological safety. Ask them what they think would be helpful and if they want help with sorting it out or if they think they can manage to do it themselves, keeping to the house rules.
7. **Encourage them sometimes to have time apart** when it is clear neither is happy. Helping them to take responsibility for giving themselves private space to recover their equanimity will help in the long term.

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8. **Remind them about your house rules and values.** "In this house it is unacceptable to..."

9. **If the fighting appears to be getting out of hand:**

- Check with them whether it is a real fight or play. Both have to agree if it is play.
- Help them to listen to each other. Help them to express themselves verbally. Older children can find "I" statements a help:

I feel this..... when you do that.....  
because (this is the effect it has on me).....  
and I want you to do this..... How do you  
feel about this? Then the other has a chance  
to comment, also making an "I" statement.  
This can be the beginning of problem solving.

Help them to complete the problem solving,  
by coming to a resolution which needs to be  
agreed to by both if appropriate.

- If all else fails, separate them, but don't reward either (even indirectly...like "you come with me"). With young children it is better to create separate spaces within the room with you than try to banish them from each other's and your company. There are some ages when they need to be with you to re-gather themselves. They need your quiet presence to 'make a new start.'

10. **Take definite action when one child is being unfairly and continually victimised** but beware! The one who screams the loudest is

*Remember some squabbling between children is going to occur between all but the most amenable children. Some of it may be just playfulness and mock fights of the sorts we see in young animals, where they learn the rules of combat. But serious sibling fights and rivalry needs to be understood and dealt with. It can be damaging to self-esteem and make home an unsafe place to be. It is up to the adults to observe children's behaviour carefully and act when necessary.*

**Other articles of interest on the website**

*Harassment: How can parents help, Development Profiles, Avoiding trouble series.*

sometimes the bully but is more underhanded about it. It sometimes helps to listen to other people's observations of your children's interactions here.

11. **When you DO intervene, be decisive, without debate**, use 100% firmness and all your inner authority. Stand upright, centred, with inner resolve. Keep your speech slow, low, firm, using a minimum of words.

**A note on children who do not or will not fight:** There are some children of gentle temperaments who just do not and will not fight. It may be that they are loving, centred children who are peacemakers by nature and just choose not to fight. Just make sure that these children are encouraged to say yes and no firmly and are able to defend themselves if need be. If they are strong within themselves and well centred it is likely that they will not get picked on. In certain developmental ages, like Younger Twos, Younger Fives and Tens, children are more amenable, prefer cooperation and are more reluctant to fight. (Check the *Development Profiles* for your age children). However there are other children who may be more nervous, timid or fearful. These children are more likely to become victims in sibling fights and may need extra help. Similarly the strong child may need help to see where they are bullying and it is unacceptable. See the article on.