

PORTLAND PEDIATRIC GROUP, LLP

Dad, she's in my room getting into my things again!"
"Mom, he won't stop looking out of my window!"
"Me first! Me first! Me first!"

Do any of these statements sound familiar? If you have more than one child, they probably do because these are all common examples of **sibling rivalry** or **sibling conflict**. But why does sibling rivalry happen? And how can you promote peace and harmony among your children?

Can Sibling Rivalry Be Useful?

Conflict among siblings isn't unique to humans; it happens in just about every animal species that raises several young at the same time. Although human children usually don't have to compete with each other for basic food and shelter, other effects of sibling conflict may prove helpful in the long run. For example, learning to cope with disagreements and disputes with one's sibling can help to promote several important skills, such as how to:

- value another person's perspective
- compromise and negotiate
- control aggressive impulses

As useful as sibling conflict may be in teaching our children these important skills, your family can only tolerate a certain amount of conflict, so it helps to keep it under control. To do so, you need a good understanding of the many factors that affect the frequency and severity of disagreements between brothers and sisters.

Why Do My Children Fight?

Most brothers and sisters experience some degree of jealousy or competition, and this can flare into the squabbles and bickering that we call sibling rivalry. Factors that might influence how often sibling conflict happens and how severe it is include:

Individual Characteristics

Family structure is only part of the picture. Conflict among siblings is also affected by the individual characteristics of the children in the family, such as one or more children who are:

- fussy
- easily bored
- tense
- easily frustrated

In addition, children who have areas of significant weakness in the development of such skills as language, attention, and social interaction may be more likely to experience friction with their siblings.

Family Function

Recent research suggests that the way a family functions can affect sibling conflict. This research shows that sibling rivalry is least likely to occur within families in which :

- parents model how to find solutions to daily problems and disagreements in ways that are respectful, productive, and not aggressive
- there's an overall family rule or understanding that physical aggression and name calling is unacceptable
- members frequently enjoy activities that are fun for all family members

Sibling relationships may be a barometer of your family's level of harmony. Working to improve how smoothly your family functions overall may help to reduce the likelihood of sibling rivalry.

Television and Movies

Research shows that exposure to violent [TV](#) and movie images increases the risk of aggressive behavior among children. This is especially true for children who are already prone to aggressive behavior.

There has also been research on how TV and films portray sibling relationships. This research indicates that, especially in children's TV and films, sibling conflict and disrespect have become the norm. With these points in mind, it may be helpful to reduce the amount of violent or aggressive programming that your children watch. If they do watch this type of material, watch it with them and talk about what's being depicted.

You can also teach critical viewing skills by helping your children to understand the real-life consequences of [violence](#) and to come up with nonviolent solutions to the problems presented in a particular program or film.

What Can I Do?

Once you have a better understanding of sibling rivalry, it may be helpful to develop guidelines about how to react when your children squabble. Try these ideas:

- Don't react at all. Only get involved in your children's disputes if there's a danger of physical harm. Even then, encourage your children to resolve the crisis themselves. If you intervene, try to resolve problems **with** your children, not **for** them.
- Separate your children until they are calm and instruct them to return with at least one idea about how their conflict could have been avoided or resolved.
- Don't put too much focus on figuring out which child is to blame for your children's fights. It takes two to fight - anyone who is involved is partly responsible.
- If your children frequently squabble over the same items (such as TV or video games) post a schedule showing which child "owns" that item at what times during the week.
- If fights between your school-age children are frequent, have weekly family meetings in which you repeat your family's rules about fighting and name calling and review your family's successes in reducing conflicts.

Getting Professional Help

In a small percentage of families, the conflict between brothers and sisters is so severe that it's unlikely to go away without the help of a psychologist, psychiatrist, or other mental health professional. Consider getting professional help if sibling conflict:

- is so severe that it is leading to marital problems
- creates a real danger of physical harm to one or more family members
- is damaging to the [self-esteem](#) or psychological well-being of one or more family members
- may be related to another psychiatric disorder, such as [depression](#) or [drug abuse](#)

Your child's doctor can help you determine whether your family might benefit from professional help and refer you to a professional in your area.

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