

DISPUTES BETWEEN SIBLINGS

adapted from
Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too*,
(4th ed.) Adelaide, East Street.

Family relationships can be safe places to practise resolving disputes; therefore, the occasional conflict between siblings is both inevitable and helpful. On the other hand, the imperative that families be bully-free zones means that you must act to put an end to chronic disputes, taunting, belittling or physical aggression between siblings.

Your relationships with your own siblings might tell you that parents cannot make brothers and sisters like each other, but they can absolutely insist on civility and courtesy between them.

The following measures can be used for sibling disputes and also for conflict between playmates. They require that you help the children to manage sharing, solving problems, and dealing with any feelings of jealousy or rivalry.

SHARING

We typically expect children to be better at sharing than are adults, when we are very careful about lending our car or household items to others. Like us, children need some territory that is theirs alone and to have the right to choose with whom to share.

Prevention

Prevent disputes by having enough of most toys that siblings or other playmates do not constantly have to compete for each other's. Having said this, nothing makes a toy more attractive than seeing another child playing with it, in which case the next measure will also be necessary.

Let children take control of sharing

Assist your children to divide their toys into those that are for sharing and those that are personal. When playing with siblings or visiting children, these favourite toys can be put away and the remainder shared. When you do not impose sharing on the children, they are actually more willing to be generous; giving them permission to retain control of some personal items also gives you permission not to share everything you own with your children.

Allowing children some personal, non-sharing items is particularly important for those who have lost someone very close to them. They tend to be less able to share, as if they have learned early to grasp anything that is going, because they never know when it won't be there any more.

Allow them to finish their play

When possible, allow children to finish with an item before having to surrender it to another child. You might ask them how long they will need it so that a waiting child can gauge how long he or she must wait for a turn.

Offer restricted choice

When children have snatched a toy from another and refuse to return it, you can offer a restricted choice about doing so, for example: 'You can give that back to Tim, or

you can put it down over there'. This allows them to save face while still having to give back the contested item.

PROBLEM SOLVING

Like any other developmental skills, sharing and problem solving need to be taught and practised. They also require that children learn to regulate or manage their feelings and impulses. These skills are sophisticated. Therefore, children will make many mistakes before they become proficient at them.

Teach communication skills

Teach and support your children to listen to each other, assert their own needs and solve problems collaboratively. Remind them that 'We use our words, not our fists' to resolve conflict.

Guide their collaborative problem solving

When you can hear a dispute in its early stages, ask the children if they can sort it out themselves. If they say they can, tell them that you will give them a certain (very limited) amount of time to do so, and will step in if they have not managed it by then (or earlier if the dispute escalates into physical aggression).

When you do step in, look for a *solution*, not a *culprit*. Begin by asking each child in turn what the complaint is, and relate this to the other: 'Luke, Katherine wants the train; Katherine, Luke wants the train too'.

Next, ask them how they can solve the issue. Younger children might need you to suggest a couple of solutions; older children will be able to generate their own.

If they cannot agree on a solution, impose your own. This, however, cannot be of the type, 'If you children cannot share that, I will take it off both of you', as that will not teach them how to solve disputes independently. It is also a punishment, which will provoke resistance towards you and hostility towards each other. Instead, your solution will be to help them get back in control of their feelings, after which they *will* be able to arrive at a solution.

Help them get back in control of themselves

If the children cannot exercise restraint and arrive at an agreed solution, this simply indicates that they have both become out of control of their feelings, which is a collective social tantrum.

In that case, you could hold one child and then the other until they are both calm again; you could randomly choose one child to hold, by going for the one you can catch (the randomness of this being a strong motivator for them to sort out their own disputes next time); or, if there are two parents at home at the time, you could hold one child each. (See Porter, 2006, for a description of this method). This method is not meant to be coercive but is based on the recognition that the children have become overwhelmed by their frustration and anger at each other, that these feelings are unpleasant, and that they need support in the form of a soothing hug, until they feel better. Only then will they be open to reason once more.

Time away is another option, whereby you allow each child to go and play separately, doing a favourite activity or something soothing, until they feel better. After the children are back in control of their feelings, return to the collaborative problem-solving steps.

Do the opposite of your previous approach

Children's fighting could be maintained by the fact that it gets you hopping mad. Therefore, rather than trying to *oppose* their decision to niggle at each other, you can *impose* it (except in the case of physical violence). For example: 'You two usually fight over which TV program to watch at 5 o'clock. But then you miss some of the program. So how about getting started now, so you get it sorted out ahead of time?'. Giving permission for them to do what they were going to do anyway can rob their fighting of its power to manipulate you.

Give up (your responsibility for finding a solution)

If disputes are frequent and upsetting and have not responded to these interventions, give up trying to solve the problem yourself and instead make the children responsible for stopping the habit. This method entails sitting the children down, for as long as it takes (consecutive weekends for months, if necessary), until someone thinks of something. The 'someone' will not be you: they will have to find and agree on a way to be civil to each other. (For more information about this approach, see Porter 2006.)

SIBLING JEALOUSY

To resolve chronic, repeated or ongoing disputes between siblings, you will need to deal with the children's underlying feelings about each other.

Prepare older children in advance for the birth of a new baby

Prepare older siblings in advance for the changes a new baby brings, but do not be overly sentimental about these by prescribing that the older children will love or be able to play with their baby brother or sister. Mention that there will also be times when they will feel angry or left out because of the care the baby needs, and that they will need to tell you this so you can reassure them that you still love them.

Reassure the older children that you are still available for them

Similarly, telling older children that they will be able to help look after the baby, or teach the new baby some skills is obviously well meant, but can make them feel too responsible for yours or the baby's welfare. As a result, their behaviour might swing from being very caring one minute, to being very immature and impulsive the next, even dangerous towards their baby sister or brother. Therefore, explain that they are 'growing up, but are not grown up all the way yet' and reassure them that you will still look after them even though you have another baby to care for as well.

Clarify what you expect of older children

If the older child's behaviour began to deteriorate upon the birth of your youngest child, you might interpret this as jealousy of the new baby. However, this is not helpful because there is nothing you can do about jealousy: you cannot send the baby back and you cannot change the siblings' feelings. There are no 'love-your-new-sister/brother' injections.

Instead, you need to redefine the siblings' behaviour in a new way that *does* imply what can be done about it. This is called a reframe (– see Porter 2006). What might have happened is that, out of sensitivity for the older children's potential feelings of being displaced by the new baby, you made allowances for them. As is normal, they behaved down to these lowered expectations, which provided proof to

you that they did indeed feel jealous. So you made more allowances, and their behaviour deteriorated still further.

The net result has been that, in amongst all the changes wrought by a new baby (changed routines, lack of sleep, frazzled parents), your altered expectations have been one change too many for the siblings. Therefore, you need to stabilise their world by reinstating your former expectations of them. Once their world is secure again, their demanding behaviours will reduce, particularly with your guidance.

Tell older siblings about themselves as babies

When they are interrupted or having to wait while you tend to the baby, tell older siblings stories about how you used to do this for them when they were littler, adding that they don't need you to do exactly the same things anymore. This avoids all the fussing over the baby giving them the impression that he or she is more special than they are.

Empathise with older siblings' feelings

Thank them when they are being patient, saying that you know it isn't easy – or even fair – to have to wait for the baby. Let them know that you understand that sometimes they feel cross with him or her. Acknowledging their feelings avoids these turning into resentment.

Permit all feelings

When children are expressing their anger verbally, it is not helpful to reprimand them with comments such as, 'That's not true. You really love your brother. You know you do'. Denying their anger pushes it underground from where it may merge explosively in future.

Use acknowledgment

One of the crucial advantages of using acknowledgment compared with praise is that it does not feed into competitiveness between siblings. When you celebrate but don't judge their achievements, the children do not have to compete with each other, put each other down, or tell tales to diminish each other in your eyes in an attempt to 'even the score'. (See the paper on *Praise* on this website.)

Respond to aggression

After an incident of biting or physical aggression, take the perpetrator and victim aside, perhaps holding the hand of the aggressor while he or she listens as you address the victim. Begin by reflecting the victim's feelings: 'That hurt you, didn't it?...Yes, Shelley forgot to use her words....She must have been very angry'.

Do not require perpetrators to apologise. If you shame them into doing so, you might provoke another incident. Instead, you might apologise on their behalf. 'I know when Shelley calms down, she will feel very sorry to have hurt you. I'm sure she will want to say sorry then. But she's probably too angry now, so I will say it for her. I am sorry that Shelley hurt your arm and I'm sorry that she hurt your feelings'. This validates the victim's hurt feelings without confronting perpetrators with their mistakes.

Next, nurse the recipient's injuries, inviting (but not forcing) aggressors to help, to encourage them to take responsibility for their actions.

Once the victim is mollified, help the aggressor to calm down. Bring under-three-year-old perpetrators in close to you or, if for any reason that is not practicable, impose time away, in recognition that perpetrators' behaviour shows that they cannot play in a friendly way at the moment. Even if the children resist, aggression presents one of the rare occasions where you may have to use protective force – protective in the sense of keeping surrounding children safe, but also protecting the aggressor from the social costs of developing a negative reputation as an aggressive person.

Children have a very strong sense of justice, which can be your ally as you explain the imposed isolation. Begin with a clear statement that, 'I wouldn't let Shelly do that to you, and I can't let you do that to her'. Next, insist that perpetrators take time to calm down until you know that the other children 'will be safe'. As described in Porter (2006), this time can be spent in a pleasant solitary occupation such as playing, reading or listening to music, or spent with you as you go about your other duties, or spent in a quiet hug until the child's emotions are spent. Throughout this time, you do not have to talk to children about the incident, as they have already heard that it hurt the victim physically and emotionally; moreover, their aggression was not the result of a lack of information but the outcome of a lapse of self-control.

The aim of providing this support to children when they are overwhelmed is to teach them to manage their emotions and impulses. Once they are calm again, they might need your help to re-engage in an activity.

Stay in charge of the family

As far as possible, make sure that you stay in control of the changes that a baby brings. Babies can present many challenges and, while you might not have immediate solutions for them all, you can still be clear with your older children that you will find these. And make sure to look after yourself, so that your children do not take on the burden of caring for you themselves.

FURTHER READING

Porter, L. (2006). *Children are people too: A parent's guide to young children's behaviour*. (4th ed.) Adelaide, SA: East Street Publications.
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