

SIBLING RIVALRY

**A helpful guide for families about promoting harmony
between siblings**



**CHILD CARE HEALTH PROGRAM
Public Health – Seattle & King County**

Sibling Rivalry

Many of us who have taken on the pleasure and responsibility of raising children find that it is a harder challenge than we had imagined. Our children's behavior can be hard to understand and seem even harder to change. When children are away from us in child care it may feel especially hard to cope with difficult behaviors at either the beginning or the end of the day.

One of the challenges parents face is sibling rivalry. Most parents look forward to seeing their children at the end of the workday and are not ready to be confronted with squabbling, unhappy children.

Why do siblings sometimes have a hard time getting along?

You may notice that brothers and sisters get along better sometimes than other times. Like everyone, being hungry and tired, or feeling unwell or upset can affect both a child's ability to tolerate frustration and their ability to use coping skills to get along.

Children may feel that they are missing out on the attention that their sibling is receiving. They may feel that they are treated unfairly (disciplined differently, rewarded differently) when compared to their sibling. Children may simply feel lonely and disconnected from the important people in their lives.

Children may want to play with their sibling but not know how to engage them in a positive way.



Stress

When parents are stressed they may have less time to spend with their children. Sibling rivalry may increase as children vie for the limited attention available. Stress in children's lives can also hamper their ability to use self-control, thus increasing fighting. Sometimes a child's temperament or personality makes it more difficult for them to get along.

Sometimes our own life and family experiences can make it hard to relate positively to our children. For example, your children's disagreements may remind you of your own difficulties with siblings with whom you did not get along. That may make it hard for you to help your children solve their problems.

What can you do to help your children get along?

- ❖ **Try not to compare your children to each other or anyone else!** Every child is an individual. Children need to be supported in identifying their interests and strengths. There is no reason to assume siblings will be the same or should be the same as each other.
- ❖ **Try not to label children.** For example, statements like "Sara is the quiet one, Jane is the wild one" are not useful. Children are works in progress. Describing them in absolute ways, especially when compared to siblings, is limiting and increases sibling resentment.



- ❖ Establish a household and family life where problems are solved through discussion and everyone's feelings are considered and respected.
- ❖ Rather than ask siblings to compete ("who can be the first"), set up situations where they are rewarded for working together ("let's see how fast we can clean the room together").
- ❖ All children need some space of their own and the ability to choose how they spend their playtime. Do not force siblings to play with each other or share toys. Often parents ask older siblings to accommodate the needs of their younger brother or sister. Instead, help younger siblings understand that their big brother or sister is not available at that moment. Teach younger siblings how to ask their sibling to play. If the younger child is a baby or toddler, help the older sibling set gentle and kind limits.

- ❖ Ask the older sibling if they can pick a time when they can play with their sibling. Let them know that sometimes their younger brother/sister wants to be with them, but does not know how to play “like a big kid.” Help the older sibling choose some toys that they would consider sharing.
- ❖ Refrain from lecturing older siblings about their unkind behavior toward a younger sibling: “You’re older, you should know better.” Do not take sides in sibling arguments. Even if big brother hits little sister, it is best to comment: “I see you are both upset, let’s sit down together and figure this out.” Offer big brother other non-physical options for solving problems.
- ❖ Sympathize with children and reflect their feelings back to them: “It sounds like you got very angry with your sister.”
- ❖ Have fun as a family. Shared positive experiences help children form positive relationships with their siblings, and will help reduce fighting.
- ❖ Make an effort to spend individual time with each child. Even fifteen minutes a few days per week of alone time with each child can make a difference.
- ❖ If your children attend the same child care program, ask if they can have brief visits during the day. The child care program can support the sibling bond, making it special to be a sibling.

What about welcoming new babies into the family?

To help you understand what it may be like for children when a new baby arrives, consider this: How would you feel if your partner brought home another husband/wife and said, “You will love having him/her here. They can play with you.” Most of us would not be very happy with that situation! We might even become angry and leave.

So, how can parents be sensitive to their older children when a new baby arrives?

- ❖ Prepare your child for the arrival of a new baby. If they are interested, enlist their help in getting things ready for the baby. They may give the baby some of their old toys or clothes, but be prepared if they decide to take them back. They can practice taking care of babies by playing with dolls.
- ❖ Don’t expect your child to immediately love their new sibling. Let your child know you understand that they may not find their sibling enjoyable right now, but that will likely change in the future.
- ❖ Reminisce with your child about when they were born. Spend time looking at any baby pictures you may have. Let your child know about how you took good care of them when they were small.

- ❖ Make sure you allow one-on-one time daily with your child. Especially if this is a first sibling, it can be especially shocking to a child to have to share their parents.
- ❖ Be self-observant and notice if you find yourself having a greater number of negative interactions with your older child/children. Taking care of an additional family member can be stressful and may shorten tempers and increase demands placed on other family members. Incorporate some stress reduction activities into your schedule. As little as 10 minutes a day can help.
- ❖ Offer your child emotional support by understanding and supporting their feelings and behaviors. For example, they may become angry with the baby because you are unavailable. Instead of asking them to be reasonable and wait, sympathize with their unhappiness about the situation. Let them know you understand that things have changed and that they are unhappy. Remind them that you will always be there, even if they have to wait awhile.
- ❖ Don't emphasize their new status as a "big boy/girl" as a way to let them know they cannot have what the baby has. For example, if they cry because of some disappointment don't say "You are a big boy now, only babies cry." Instead comment, "I see you are upset. Come sit with me until you feel better." The sad feelings of being displaced may make a child feel small. They may go back to behaviors they had long passed by.
- ❖ Do let them know that they now have special status as a "big brother or sister." Identify some tangible benefits and let them know what they are. Some examples include staying up while baby goes to sleep, and helping with cooking or other important chores that might be fun.

You can also follow the suggestions for helping children get along listed earlier.



When children spend their day in child care, family time is limited to evenings and weekends. Family time can thus be more precious, not only for children and their parents, but between siblings. Your children have spent much of their day getting along with other children, following directions, and being part of a group. Adult attention may be especially important.

When to seek help

Please let us know if you have continuing concerns about your child's behavior. We will let you know of any troubling behaviors we see in the classroom and work with you to develop a plan. Our Mental Health Consultants are available to help with those plans.



REFERENCES:

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. 1998. *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together so You Can Live Too*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

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