

BEHAVIORAL CONSULT

Urge Parents to React Calmly to Sibling Rivalry

From Cane and Abel to Linus and Lucy, Wally and the Beaver to Bart and Lisa Simpson, sibling rivalry is the stuff of legend and comedy. But when it presents as a source of serious concern for parents during pediatric office visits, it's usually no laughing matter for them.

Research suggests that 64% of school-age siblings fight "sometimes or often"—a figure likely matched in magnitude if not muscle by younger siblings as well.

Sibling rivalry is so common, in fact, that we may tend to think back to our own sibling spats, or those of our kids, roll our eyes and offer the "they'll grow out of it" platitude.

But in truth, sibling wars can have consequences. While injuries are rare in most sibling disputes, in 25% of child abuse cases a sibling has been involved in victimization (usually in concert with adults).

Serious sibling conflict tremendously compromises quality of life for children, and for their parents as well. We know that marriages suffer in households with high levels of sibling discord, with the issue a common flashpoint for disagreements between parents about how to respond. Children exposed to serious sibling conflict in middle childhood appear to suffer higher levels of anxiety, depression, and delinquent behavior in early adolescence. Down the road, people carry the grudges of sibling difficulties for decades, undermining bonds that might otherwise be a significant source of support in our increasingly fragmented society.

So sibling struggles are worthy of our time and thoughtfulness, and addressing them productively will build trust in your relationship with parents and perhaps bring some semblance of peace to their households.

The first response to a parent's frustration over sibling quarrels should be to listen with respect. Their pain is often significant as they describe the battles unfolding among children they hold precious. Patiently listening to the details of sibling encounters also can help you sort out whether the issues they're describing fall into the normal range or may signify more serious individual or relational issues that deserve attention.

Assuming it's the former, I think it helps to remind parents of how common sibling rivalry is, and more importantly, why it occurs. Annoying as they may be, fracas actually serve a number of important biological functions. Watch any nature documentary featuring lions

lounging under a tree on the savannah, and what are the cubs doing? Attacking, defending, tumbling, and biting, growling all the while.

In kids, like cubs, important social skills arise from the sibling relationship, even when the dust flies. Siblings teach each other to giggle and laugh, bait and switch, sneak and chase, parry and defend. From each other, they learn which jokes fly and which land with a thud, how to toss out an insult and absorb one tossed their way.

Siblings also learn how to pull their punches, practicing evolutionarily useful conflict skills while stopping short of inflicting serious harm.

The question remains, how does a family foster productive resilience-building sibling interactions while preserving affectionate connections and at least a modicum of household calm?

Like so many things in life, household chaos is associated with unhealthy levels of sibling conflict, according to research by psychologist Judy Dunn, the author of "Sisters and Brothers" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), "Separate Lives: Why Siblings Are So Different" (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and "From One Child to Two" (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

Corporal punishment in the family makes rivalry worse as well.

Individual temperaments, the presence of a child with special needs, and family structure (children of opposite sexes) also have been

found to play roles in sibling relationships, but spacing of children makes less of a difference than most people think. In general, children spaced more than 4 years apart have less conflict, but they also spend less time together and have less of an integrated relationship than closely spaced siblings do.

When looking at underlying dynamics, research points to the perception of favoritism by the parents as the main contributing factor. Importantly, the children's impressions of favoritism are not always accurate, but they are such an important driver of sibling conflict that they deserve consideration.

I suggest to parents that they make a special effort to provide roughly equal "alone" time with each child. When one child's needs really do require inordinate attention—as in the case of homework time for a child with learning disabilities—they need to be up front about that reality, and say, "If you need something special, I will be there for you, too." Remind the child who feels slighted about exceptional times when all the fo-

cus was on them: during assembly of the science fair project, or when they learned to ride a bike, for example.

Acknowledge jealousy as a real and understandable emotion, but one that must be handled within limits and household rules.

Parents will do well to practice prevention with siblings, reinforcing cooperation in general and any specific examples of good deeds performed on behalf of each other with acknowledgment or even rewards if the rivalry is serious.

Advise parents to be sensitive to situations, like boredom, that lend themselves to sibling disputes, and to intervene with distractions. Promote cooperative projects and noncompetitive games: building a fort or puzzle, playing in the sprinkler, or making breakfast as a family, instead of games with winners and losers.

When board games are necessarily competitive, make it a practice to turn the board around every fourth move to minimize age-related inequities. Even out the teams in driveway basketball as well.

Once children are old enough to participate, family meetings are an excellent forum in which to air grievances. Again, ground rules apply; everyone gets to be heard. No interrupting. Solutions can be brainstormed and tried out, to be reviewed at the next regularly scheduled session.

A stepwise approach to dealing with actual sibling disputes also helps bring order to the chaos that feeds sibling wars. Parents may want to read the popular if optimistically titled book by Adele Faber and Irene Mazlish, "Siblings Without Rivalry" (New York: HarperCollins Publishing, 2004).

Essentially, their basic plan is to teach parents to ignore whatever can be ignored, thus avoiding a self-feeding loop of inadvertent reinforcement of the conflicts.

Situations that are a bit too much to ignore should be handled dispassionately.

The parent may want to ask, "Is this a real fight or a play fight?" If it's a play fight but noisy, they might want to suggest a new venue—in the basement or outdoors.

If it's a real fight, encourage parents to simply describe the situation they see. "It looks like you both want to play with the truck, and it's hard to decide how to work it out." Follow this with an affirming statement like, "I'm sure you can figure out a solution."

If things are even more volatile—maybe someone has hit or pinched—parents should intervene, but in an unbiased manner and with the least amount of

punishment that makes sense. They need to emphasize that hitting is never acceptable, but not take sides. A useful mantra for parents: "Don't try to judge who started it. You can never tell."

Depending on the situation, both children may need to be sent to a room away from the toy to make a plan for resolution. The toy may need to be put in time out. Both kids may need to be put in time out for the same amount of time, with duration based on the younger child's age. Each child may need to take on an individual chore card, or even chores requiring the effort of both kids.

Whatever the solution, it should be brief.

Counsel parents that rivalry is part of sibling interaction: a challenge best met through prevention, structured responses, and reliance on family rules.

Remind them of the fleeting nature of sibling spats—don't they hear the kids giggling 15 minutes later?—and the permanence of warm, mutually respectful, sibling bonds through a lifetime. ■

DR. HOWARD is assistant professor of pediatrics at The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, and creator of the Child Health & Development Interactive System, CHADIS (www.CHADIS.com). Dr. Howard's contribution to this publication was as a paid expert to Elsevier. E-mail her at pdnews@elsevier.com.



BY BARBARA J. HOWARD, M.D.

How does a family foster resilience-building sibling interactions while preserving affectionate connections and at least a modicum of household calm?

IMNG medjobs.com

Thinking about a change? Interested in relocating? Go where the jobs are ...

www.imngmedjobs.com