

Parenting the Preschooler

 **Working for Wisconsin Families**

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Sibling Rivalry

Nothing upsets a parent more on a daily basis than the constant bickering and fighting that goes on between their own sons and daughters. Sibling rivalry can turn a peaceful and quiet home into a momentary battleground. How to control the fighting, nagging, pushing, and name calling that goes on between brothers and sisters is a question that has puzzled parents for years. The answer lies within each family because every situation is different. There are, however, some helpful ideas puzzled parents can consider and try.

Opportunity to Learn

The home is the first school for learning how to get along with others. Part of this process involves learning how to deal with conflict and differences. But learning how to resolve disagreements will help children handle difficult situations in the future. Preschool children need practice at problem solving and resolving differences. It may be easier to step in with “solutions,” but the children may not learn from them. A beautiful aspect of sibling relationships is that the children have an opportunity to learn how to get along with others in a safe atmosphere. For example, a child will say something to a brother knowing that the brother will still play with him. If the same thing was said to a playmate outside the family, the playmate may be lost for good. Many things are said and done within the safe confines of the home that permit children to test how far they can go in what they say and do. They are learning.

Set Limits

Set limits on how far the rivalry can go. Rules need to be made about whether the children are permitted to fight or call each other names. Your family must work out specific rules depending on the ages of the children. With very young children who have not developed good social skills, parents may need to separate children. The children must know the rules and punishments for breaking the rules. Parents must be consistent. For example, if the rule is “no

name calling,” the rule must be enforced day in and day out. Children will gradually learn what is appropriate behavior, but it takes time. Remember, each child occasionally will break the rule and then must suffer the consequences. Children are beginners. They must learn when parents say something, they mean it.

One Rule:
Always step in when the
argument becomes physical.

An important message to give to your children is that people are not for hitting. At that point, stop the fight and tell your children that physical violence will not be tolerated.

Give Each Child Individual Attention

Every child wants more of the parent’s attention. A child who feels brother or sister is getting more time, attention or favor from a parent is likely to feel jealous. He may do or say something to express the jealousy. Help the child who feels he deserves more attention by setting aside some time each day to be with him. The time period does not have to be long--it may be only 10 to 15 minutes. Try to minimize the distractions and interruptions. Setting aside time is difficult for many parents to do on a regular basis, but try it anyway. Individual time and attention assure your preschooler that there is a secure place with you.

A New Baby in the Family

The rivalry that may develop when an infant brother or sister is born can be tempered by giving the older child some extra doses of attention and by preparing her ahead of time. It helps to have the older child settled in her bedroom before the infant arrives home. Never make the older child literally give up her baby bed to the infant. Move the older child ahead of time. Take the crib down,

store it, if only for a few weeks, then put it back up. The older child will feel she has a new bed and has not been displaced by the newcomer to the family. Set aside time to do some of the older child's favorite activities. Use the time when the baby is asleep to be with the older child.

Reduce Competition

As children get older, sibling rivalry may increase. One mother reported she had a very peaceful home until her sons became involved in sports. She reported that the boys turned into little demons and constantly argued and fought over who was the better baseball player. In situations like this, the parent can help by avoiding comparisons and by assuring each child that every person has special abilities. One person is better at hitting, the other does better in the field, etc. Try to play down the competition and emphasize the importance of learning the game and having fun.

Encourage Cooperation

Recognize cooperative behavior. If you see your daughter share her toys with her brother, tell her you appreciate her behavior. "I really liked the way you let Jimmy build the blocks with you. That makes a nice feeling in our family." Praise is most effective when you describe the behavior you liked and why you liked it.

Friction Likely When Children are Tired or Hungry

Rivalry often begins when two children are hungry, physically tired, or tired of doing something like playing together or cleaning their bedroom. In this situation probably the best remedy is to separate the children. Plan to have them clean their room at different times or make very explicit assignments of who does what work. If the children are tired and signs of discord are present, you can best handle the situation by being physically present. Don't count on the two children to solve many problems when they're tired. A few minutes of your time spent helping the children get ready for bed or simply sitting on the edge of the bed talking to the children will help remove much of the friction that ordinarily might fill the air.

Give Each Child Individual Space

Give each child some space that he can call his own. If two brothers share the same room, make clear division of

space. This might be done by the placement of the furniture. Make certain each child knows his territory.

Be Fair

Help children understand that you, the parent, are fair. When it comes time to pick up toys or do chores, divide the jobs or area that is to be cleaned. If the children can't work together, have one work, then the other. However, being fair does not always mean being equal. Older children may have more privileges due to greater maturity.

Probably the most important aspect of handling sibling rivalry is the home atmosphere. Develop a warm and loving relationship with your children. Spend time with your children alone and together. Develop a pattern or habit of getting along. Make each child feel wanted, loved, and important. Remember that sibling rivalry doesn't always last forever. In most families, sibling relationships get better with time.

For more ideas on dealing with sibling relations, check out these books:

Between Brothers and Sisters: A Celebration of Life's Most Enduring Relationship. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. 1989.

He Hit Me First: When Brothers and Sisters Fight. Louise Bates Ames with Carol Chase Haber and The Gesell Institute of Human Development. 1989.

Raising Cain: How to Help Your Children Achieve a Happy Sibling Relationship Herbert S. Strean, D.S.W., and Lucy Freeman. 1988.

The Sibling Bond. Stephen P. Bank and Michael D. Kahn. 1982.

Siblings Without Rivalry. Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. 1988.

Sources:

Thomas R. Lee. *Utah State University. "How to Reduce Sibling Rivalry."* PENPAGES. Jan. 1996.

Vikki Morain. *Iowa State University. "Tips for Dealing With Sibling Rivalry."* PENPAGES. Jan. 1996.

Parent's Resource Almanac. <http://family.starwave.com>. 1997.

J. Van Horn. *Pennsylvania State University. "Helping Brothers and Sisters Get Along."* PENPAGES. Dec. 1996.

J. Van Horn. *Pennsylvania State University. "Controlling Sibling Rivalry."* PENPAGES. Dec. 1995.

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