

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

Minimizing Sibling Rivalry and Maximize the Relationship



BY KIM DeMARCHI

In the last two issues of Tualatin Life, my articles have been dedicated to issues with siblings, which we can all relate to unfortunately. Why DO they fight and bicker? A variety of reasons, which include: They might

be sick and not feeling well. They might be tired and have no patience. They might be feeling bored and it gives them something to do. They might need to express themselves. They might have too much bottled up physical energy. It simply might be a habit, be it a bad one. They might fight for "the fun of it"! Some people just love to engage in power struggles and conflict. It might just be that the moment is considered LLC, Lousy, Local Conditions. Perhaps your children are hot, hungry, and on a trip. In that case, these are not teachable moments. Cool them off and get them something to eat.

The last and possibly most important reason children fight is for ATTENTION! Our attention! We, as parents, actually contribute to a significant amount of the reason our children choose to fight. We place labels on them. We compare them to each other. We give inappropriate attention to the "bully" and the "victim". We ONLY give them attention when they are engaged with fighting with one another. We talk about the other child behind the sibling's back. We give BIG reactions to their fights which increase the level of energy and basically pays them to misbehave...more ways of giving them the wrong kind of attention.

So, why is all this sibling conflict a problem for them OR us? Plain and simple. It's unpleasant for everybody. It forms bad habits. It's negative and changes the energy in the home. It's draining and exhausting to be a part of or to listen to. It decreases the emotional safety in the home, and the home is where everybody has the right to feel 100% emotionally and physically safe at all times. For me personally, it also goes against our direct values about how we treat others. I have said many, many times, "We don't hurt each other on the inside or the outside."

Parents all come equipped with a toolbox of parenting tactics and strategies. Some are quick and easy to implement, i.e.: yelling so loudly that it shocks them and they stop fighting, or spanking them which creates fear so that they won't misbehave again, at least for a little while. Most of the quick and easy methods are not the most effective however. I realize we want to extinguish our children's misbehavior as soon as we can, but we also need to take time for training. It absolutely does take more time and more effort to "train" our children, but it is worth it in the long run. We want to teach them skills that they can use now and in their future. Take time for training, and start with being their #1 role model. Make no mistake...your children are watching everything you do and hearing everything you say and how you say it.

Tips for Minimizing the Rivalry:

- Put them in the same boat when intervening...treat them the same
- Avoid labeling (we don't really know what happened)
- Don't play favorites
- Have individual property (toys) and community property

• Minimize competition and comparison... whether the comparisons are positive or negative, they have the same effect, i.e.:

Positive: "I love that picture! You are definitely the artist in our family!"

"Wow, you got your math done so quickly! Your brother really struggled with math."

"You can ride your two wheeler now, not like your sister that still rides her tricycle."

Negative: "I can't believe you spilled your milk. Even your baby brother doesn't spill his milk."

"How come I have to tell you three times, and your sister listens the first time?"

Try and use Neutral Statements:

"You really enjoy art, don't you? I can certainly tell!"

"Way to go! You finished your math in 20 minutes!"

"You look very proud of yourself that you've learned how to ride a two-wheeler."

"Hmmm...you've spilled your milk. What do you think you need to do to clean it up?"

"I feel frustrated when I have to tell you more than once to brush your teeth because it feels like you aren't listening to me."

Tips for Maximizing the Relationship:

- Establish a We vs. Me mentality... Ask the question, "Whose team are you on?", have them make team goals, i.e.: garage sale with proceeds to buy a new tetherball they both want, have up a team handshake, chant, mission statement

• Sibling Treasure Jar... put jewels in the jar when you see either of them doing something nice for the other, or making a good choice not to tease back. Once it's filled, they get to choose what they'd like to do together, i.e.: Family Fun Center

• Kindness Tree... start with a construction paper trunk on a wall; add leaves to the tree when you catch one of them doing something kind for the other, such as helping them clean up the toys

• Celebrate their Relationship... let them make or buy gifts for each other for birthdays and holidays. Encourage times where they just go do an activity together, without friends. Declare "Sibling Sundays" and they get to watch a movie and eat popcorn together. Keep them on the same team when playing board games against parents.

• Arrange time for them to be apart from one another. They need quality time alone with each parent. Have an outing together, run an errand together, go on a dinner date, arrange for separate play dates, let each child go visit Grandma without the other sibling.

• Treat and love each child fairly and uniquely, not equally. We all have different needs. Different children require different kinds of attention at different times.

Research shows that families that have higher levels of conflict also have higher levels of closeness and warmth. The goal therefore is not to eliminate all conflict, but rather to teach our children and model effective tools to actually help increase the bonds, trust, and warmth in your home, and to help them gain useful conflict resolution skills to use with their loved ones, friends, and coworkers in the future. What a child doesn't receive or have, he can seldom later give.

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