

Lincoln Pediatrics

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Sibling Quarrels

Most siblings argue and quarrel occasionally. They fight over possessions, space on the sofa, time in the bathroom, or the last donut. On most days, though, siblings are friends and companions instead of rivals and competitors. The ambivalence between love and hate is present in all close relationships. This ambivalence becomes more intense in siblings because both want to gain their parents' attention and be their parents' favorite. The positive side of sibling rivalry is that it gives children a chance to learn to give and take, share, and stand up for their rights.

How can I help my children?

1. **Encourage children to settle their own disagreements.** Have a rule: Settle your own arguments, but no hitting, damaging property, or name calling. The more you intervene, the more you will be called upon to intervene. When possible stay out of your children's disagreements as long as they remain verbal. Children can't go through life having a referee to resolve their differences. By arguing with siblings and peers, children will learn to negotiate with others and find common ground. However, if your children are both less than 3 years old and one of them is aggressive, you will need to supervise them closely. At this age children do not understand the potential dangers of fighting.
2. **If your children come to you with their argument, try to stay out of the middle.** Try to keep your children from bringing their argument to you for an opinion. Remind them that they should settle it themselves. If you do become involved, help your children clarify what they are arguing about by teaching them to listen better. Encourage each child to describe the problem for a minute or two while the other child listens without interrupting. If they still don't understand the issue, try to describe it for them. Unless there's an obvious culprit, do not try to decide who is to blame, who started it, or who is right. Interrogating them about this can be counterproductive because it may encourage them to exaggerate or lie. Also, do not impose a solution. Since it's their problem, let them find their own solution whenever possible.
3. **If an argument becomes too loud, do something about it.** If the arguing becomes annoying or interferes with your ability to think, go to your children and tell them, "I do not want to hear your arguing. Please settle your differences quietly or find another place to argue." If they continue arguing loudly, send them to the basement, outdoors, or to time-out in separate rooms. If they are arguing over an object such as the TV, don't allow either to watch. If they are arguing over who gets to sit in the front seat of the car, ask them both to sit in the back seat. If they are arguing about going somewhere, cancel the trip for both.
4. **Do not permit hitting, breaking things, or name calling.** Under these circumstances punish both of your children. If they are hurting each other, send them both to time-out in separate places no matter who is hitting when you arrive at the scene. Usually you cannot know which child took the first swing or provoked the fighting. Do not allow name calling or teasing because it hurts feelings (for example, calling a child who is not good in school a "dummy," one who is not athletic "clumsy," or one who has a bed-wetting problem "smelly"). Do not permit such derogatory comments because they can hurt a child's self-esteem.
5. **Stop arguing that occurs in public places.** If you are in a shopping mall, restaurant, or movie theater and your children begin arguing, you need to stop them because it is annoying to other people. If the arguing continues after a warning, separate them (for example, by sitting between them). If that doesn't work, give them a 2- to 5-minute time-out outside or at an out-of-the-way spot. If your children are over age 4 or 5, you can sometimes tell them that if they don't stop arguing they will get a 30-minute time-out (or 30-minute loss of TV time) when you get home. Sometimes you will have to leave the public setting and take your children home.
6. **Protect each child's personal possessions, privacy, and friendships.** When children argue over a toy and the toy belongs to one of the children, return it to the owner. A child doesn't have to share his possessions. Warn him, however, that sometime he may want to play with his sister's toy and expect her to share it with him. She may not feel like sharing it if he has not shared his toy with her. Teach your children to take turns playing with family toys such as video games or board games. Also teach your child to share toys when friends come over. Sharing is a necessary skill for making and keeping friends and getting along in school. Younger siblings often intrude on older siblings' friendships and play. It is helpful if you give the younger sibling a playmate or special activity when your older child has a friend over. Protect your child's study time from interruption. Designating a study room often helps.
7. **Avoid showing favoritism.** All punishment for arguing or fighting must be group punishment. Do not believe the myths that fights are always started by the brother rather than the sister, by the older child rather than the younger one, or by one child who is the troublemaker. Rivalry will be intense if a parent shows favoritism. Try to treat your children as unique and special individuals. Do not take sides. Do not compare them and do not categorize them as good children and bad children. Do not listen to tattling. If one of your children complains that you are not being fair, either ignore this comment or restate the rule that has been broken. If you are feeling guilty, remind yourself that being a parent is difficult and any mistakes you make will balance out.
8. **Praise cooperative behavior.** Whenever you see your children playing together in a friendly way, praise them together. Compliment them for helping each other and settling disagreements politely.

How can I help prevent fighting and name calling?

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First, help your children acknowledge their feelings. Let them know it is all right to be angry towards a sibling but they should not vent their anger by fighting or name calling. Give them useful alternatives to hurtful arguing, such as talking to you about it.

Second, provide access to outside friends and different activities. Do not expect your children to play with each other constantly.

Third, do not show favoritism toward one child over another. Try to talk with each child every day and to schedule a special individualized activity once or twice a week.

Most important, show your children how to settle disagreements peacefully and in a calm voice. Try not to act disrespectful, disagreeable, or ill-tempered to your children or other people.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call during office hours if:

- Your children are not getting along any better after you have followed these recommendations for six weeks.
- Your children fight with each other constantly.
- Your children have several other behavioral problems.
- One of your children constantly teases the other.
- One of your children has physically harmed the other.
- You have other questions or concerns.

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