



3 Simple Rules in
**DEALING WITH
SIBLING RIVALRY**



Are you pulling your hair out with your kids fighting? Just about all parents with more than one kid hit the wall in varying degrees with this age-old problem. Whatever you're thinking, be assured you're not alone!

WHY? Emotion Behind Sibling Rivalry

I'm not sure what I really need to say about sibling rivalry. It exists. It's existed since the beginning of time. Why wasn't there a manual given to us before we brought that second child home from the hospital? It's bound to happen so we should prepare ourselves, right? As silly as it sounds, no one really is prepared for how challenging sibling rivalry can be.

We need to recognize that kids want attention, power and control. If those things are disturbed then often times sibling rivalry can arise more frequently than we'd like.

Attention: As we all know; kids crave attention of any sort. When their cravings aren't met, they can often look elsewhere to generate more attention, often not good attention. When a younger child arrives on the scene who is cute, adorable and needy (they need help eating or dressing or diapers changed, etc.) the older kids try to be good and helpful but no one notices them. However, if they whack their little brother on the head then someone finally notices them. Not what we'd like but it certainly draws our attention, doesn't it?

Power and Control: On the other hand, if younger kids feel powerless and at the mercy of older siblings, they try to fight back but explode with frustration over their inability to control what they want to happen. These kids are learning how to get what they want but they don't have the right skills yet so they use what they have which is to yell, hit, throw, wreck their siblings work or toys, whatever they can.

It's all a bit crazy but how we interact with our kids and their siblings during these developmental years will actually impact them in the future. There seem to be four types of sibling behaviors in my mind that I categorize by giving names: wimps, bullies, whiners and negotiators.

- **Wimps:** In an altercation, some kids cave every time, instead of learning how to stand up for themselves they just give in, it's easier. It just doesn't seem fair that the other sibling always gets their way just because this child gives in. We parents are worried that we have a wimp in development and we really want to change that.
- **Bullies:** This is usually an older, bigger sibling who can rule by their brawn and their brains since they're more able than younger siblings. These are the kids who take things away from the wimpier siblings with no regrets. This can activate feelings of injustice in us parents as we see this child taking advantage of the weaker sibling at every turn. We wonder if empathy, kindness and fairness are even entering that kid's head.
- **Whiners:** They cry about everything and anything. Helicopter parents play into this big time by siding with the kid who whines the most or the loudest just based on volume we feel a major injustice **MUST** have happened.
- **Negotiators:** Some kids learn that if they use their words, they can negotiate what they want. These kids see they aren't powerless even though they might not win every battle. Their self-esteem can be enhanced instead of diminished if the right type of support is in their lives to help grow their negotiation skills.

You probably can see your children in one of these sibling types so now let's get down to the nitty-gritty about 3 rules to use when siblings fight regardless of which type of sibling they are.



Rule #1 - Don't get involved, don't take sides, don't blame

If your kids are fighting, try stay out of it unless there is bodily harm being done. Let them fight and figure out what's going to happen. If they come running to you, send them away. Try really hard not to listen to their sob stories and don't take sides. Most of the time there are two sides to every story and parents don't always get to see and hear both so just focus on it was a choice for them to fight and isn't draining you to hear them fight. Keep calm and encourage them to work it out. Remember that, KEEP CALM and use empathy! Don't engage. No yelling, no telling. Yelling gets us nowhere. Try something like:

Oh wow, I can tell this is a problem for the two of you. I'm sure you can figure something out. This is really draining my energy hearing you fight.



Rule #2 - Separate, if necessary

Sometimes the solution is that no one wins. If they can't figure things out then it's ok to step in and take whatever it is away from everyone using EMPATHY and LOVE.

Oh, this is so sad. It looks like you two can't work this out and it's really wearing mommy down. I'll go ahead and put the blocks away for now. You're welcome to play with two different things but do it in two different locations. If you can't figure out what and where then just go head to your rooms for a while.



Rule #3 – Brainstorm to teach communication and negotiation skills when kids are calm

During the heat of the moment really isn't the time to solve the larger and longer-term issue of sharing and getting along. Yes, you can take a toy out of the equation but when things really calm down and there's no active fight-or-flight brain going on you need to sit your kids down and talk about how to improve communication for next time they have issues. You're going to do brainstorming to help your kids learn to set expectations and negotiate. The brainstorming will happen hours or even days later, it wouldn't be within minutes of an altercation.

What would brainstorming look like? Here are some ideas of what to cover:

1. Calming ideas: I'd recommend you ask them to think about ideas of how to stay calm when they notice they are getting upset -- take deep breaths, count to 10, walk away or other meditation techniques. Write them down. Put them on a sign. Practice them every morning or at the dinner table so they know what it feels like.

2. "I Feel" Statements: have them express their feelings to each other using "I feel" statements
 - I feel like Ken always gets to use the truck and I never do
 - I feel mad when Sara wrecks my Lego tower, I've taken so long to build
 - I feel mad when Jessie takes crayons and writes all over my artwork I was making
 - I feel sad when Alan took the last cookie and there wasn't any for me

3. Taking Turns: Often times kids want to use the same toy or device at the same time. Encourage the concept of "taking turns" and help them establish mechanisms for keeping track. For example:
 - Both my boys always wanted to press the buttons when we went into an elevator. It was driving me crazy that they'd rush in and try to be the first to push a button and wind up in a battle or someone crying that they didn't get to do it. So we set a sharing rule that one boy was always the "UP" pusher and the other was the "DOWN" pusher. It was magic! At least with two kids...
 - In your house, you can set up posters or a magnet on the fridge or an app on your phone to help them keep track of whose turn it is next. I'd prefer it not be electronic but you can decide as a family ways to keep track of "turns". It might be that your kids fight or fuss over who reads to them at night. Come up with a way that you rotate on a schedule – odd days for one kid and even days for the other. If you have more than two then set up a calendar if you have to and have them check off the days as you go to bed each night. Be creative but show them that they can share best when they communicate that sharing is needed.

4. It's OK not to Share: Feel free to encourage your kids set boundaries to protect items they cherish and how to let others know in a kind manner to respect boundaries.
 - Little sister, these are my Legos and I'm putting them in my special box. Please don't touch them unless I say so.
 - Brainstorm with your children about how to put away toys so they aren't tempting to others who shouldn't be touching them
 - You also have to define consequences if boundaries aren't respected.

Oh, this is so sad, Jenny, you knocked down brother's tower so I guess you won't be able to play near him today. You can play in your room instead.



Energy Drain and Taking Care of Mom and Dad

What I've talked about so far is all about the kids but I want to talk about you. Yes, how draining it is for you as a parent to hear all this fighting and fussing day after day. One of the most useful tools I think of in dealing with siblings is Love and Logic's Energy Drain concept. They have a great audio available on Energy Drain as well as another on Sibling Rivalry that I'll put links to in the podcast notes. They explain that when kids are fighting it zaps us and they need to put energy back into us or we don't have energy to read them books, cook them dinner, drive them to a friend's house or take them to school. It's really amazing how effective it is so please look it up. I also have a list of Energy Drain ideas on my website if you need help thinking of a chore or act of service for your kids to do to put energy back in you like washing windows, sweeping the back porch or putting hand lotion on your hands. I'll put that link in the notes as well.

This concept can be so heartwarming when you take the time to do it. One mom has sent me a video of her kids washing the patio furniture with brushes and soap when they drained mommy's energy by fighting.

Set up special time regularly

Lastly, I want to talk about what to do when your kids just seem to be at each other day after day and you can't seem to break out of the pattern. Lack of attention is often the culprit but it could be that one child is just bored or unsatisfied in some other way with friendships or school and torturing their sibling gives them something to do.

We need to figure out ways to set up what I call Special Time that I've talked about in a few different podcast episodes and articles. In this case, I'd suggest 10-15 minutes of one-on-one time per kid, per day or at the very least per week, so that each kid has some sort of one-on-one connection with their parents to nourish that feeling of unconditional love and acceptance. During that time, you allow your child to decide what they want to do with you. Let them know there's a time limit and set a timer.

One mom I know at my church who was having some trouble, decided to set up Special Time right after school with each of her elementary boys. They rotate 15 minutes at a time and know that when it's not their turn they are to play quietly. They LOVE this Special Time and it's working wonders for peace, calm and connectedness in their home.

Another family was having a problem with their 6-year-old son, Ben, being mean and fighting with his little 4-year-old brother, Joe, all the time. They had a newborn as well so it was a busy household. Ben always seemed to be picking on Joe and always seemed to be in a bad mood. After brainstorming with the parents, we decided the issue might be that he was feeling disconnected what with an adorable baby girl and mom and dad being so busy taking care of everything and he needed some Special Time.

With 3 kids it was hard to set aside time but the couple decided that as soon as dad came home from work, he would play chess with his son for 15 minutes or so before dinner. Two weeks later they reported back to me the amazing difference in their son's attitude and behavior. He was a new child! Wow!

In setting aside this time they dealt a decisive blow to their son's attitude and sibling rivalry at the same time. Ben was playing much better with Joe and even on his own. I was so proud of the parents doing that extra work. It really hit home for me that I need to encourage Special Time to be set up in every home for so many reasons that feed into our kids need for love and acceptance. In our hurry-hurry world we sometimes need to slow down, don't we? It's hard to make the time but it can really pay off big time, especially when you have misbehaviors cropping up all the time.



To help calm down your home look for more practical parenting solutions by visiting Mary's **PARENTING DECODED®** podcast for all sorts of ideas like:

Tantrums

Punishment vs. Consequences

Food Battles

Night Time Battles

Setting Boundaries

Screen Time Battles

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Chores

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