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## Help! My Children Are Fighting Again!

By Kathryn Kvols

Why do children fight? Children fight to get their parents to choose one child over the other, to release tension and sometimes they fight because they are bored and fighting creates excitement.

There is probably no activity that evokes more frustration from parents than fighting. How can we stop and prevent fighting? First let's look at some things we do unknowingly to encourage their fights.

Use comparisons "I wish you would get good grades like your sister." Statements like this make children feel resentful toward their sibling.

Use competition "Whoever gets to the car first, wins." This seems like an innocent statement however, it provokes competition and encourages fighting words like, "I get to sit in the front seat. I was here first."

Tell them not to feel negative feelings towards their sibling. This is the way we teach our children to be afraid to share their feelings with us. The feelings don't go away; they are likely to intensify because they're never dealt with in a healthy way. Instead of saying, "You don't hate your brother," empathize with your child's anger. Say, "I can understand that you're really angry with Jason right now."

Force children to share. Be sure your child has some things he doesn't have to share.

Have a favored child. Children are very sensitive to parents who show favoritism.

Children get favored for different reasons: being the "baby," being chronically sick, or excelling in an activity that requires a lot of time and attention. Feeling like one child gets more attention than another (either positive or negative attention) creates resentment.

Rescuing Often we feel the need to rescue one child from another. This sets up a victim/bully mentality that is not healthy. Believe it or not, your victim often provokes the bully so that she can get rescued!

As parents, we have a unique opportunity: to teach our children how to handle conflict in a way that will affect your children for the rest of their life! The skills they learn now will be used on the playground as children, in the boardroom as a business person, and in the bedroom as a spouse. Here are some suggestions:

Demonstrate self-control

Teach your child to breathe deeply in through his nose and out through his mouth to the count of ten when he feels angry. This will relax him and give him time to think before acting. Model using this technique yourself.

Show how to take turns and trade

Teach children how to take turns or to trade one thing for another. It helps to use an impartial aid like a timer to say how long a child has to wait before she has a turn.

Teach empathy Teach your children to consider each other's feelings. For example, "How do you think Eric feels?"

Teach repair If your child has hurt another child say, "Eric looks sad. What could you do or say to help him feel better?"

Model respect

Children need to learn how to join others in play in positive ways. Aggressive or whiny children are not welcome playmates. Teach your child how to play with others by role-playing with dolls or puppets. Let him play with two puppets, and you be the third who wants to join. Behave in ways that are not acceptable and talk about what to do differently, and then have your child practice.

Concentrate on win/win negotiation

Negotiation means both kids get what they want and need. Ask, "How can you both win?"

Make sure they are both happy with the solution.

Stress teamwork and cooperation

Use phrases like, "Let's see how fast we can get this done by working together." "Wow!

Look how fast we got that done as a team!"

Refuse to choose

If siblings are fighting over what book is read to them, say, "When the two of you have decided which book you want me to read, come and get me." This keeps you from having to choose one child over the other, teaches them how to negotiate and to be responsible for solving their problems.

Redirect child who gives in Children who develop a pattern of giving often feel resentful and continue this pattern into adulthood. Teach this child how to assert herself and get what she wants.

Schedule activities

If your children are fighting because they are bored, redirect that energy into some positive activity. Children frequently fight after watching too much television.

Be Creative

For example, one mother turns on music when the kids fight. They have all agreed to dance when the music starts. This helps release the tension in a healthy way.

If you are a parent of single children, these same principles work when you invite friends or when you are with relatives.

Children develop patterns of dealing with conflict that they will use for a lifetime. Some children learn to become victims, some bullies, and some learn healthy ways for handling conflict. The goal is not to stop or eliminate conflict. The goal is to teach your child how to deal with conflict effectively. Parents have an important influence on which patterns children will choose.

Parents often ignore fighting, hoping that it will stop. Or they minimize fighting, thinking that it's "simply child's play." Courageous is the parent who wants their children to develop good conflict resolution skills and who wants more peace in their family. If you are one of these parents, try one of these suggestions. Get help from a parenting class or therapist if you need further advice.

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