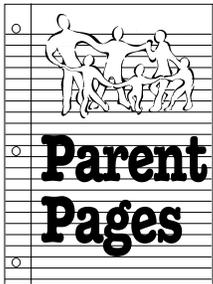


Sibling Rivalry Isn't Necessarily Bad



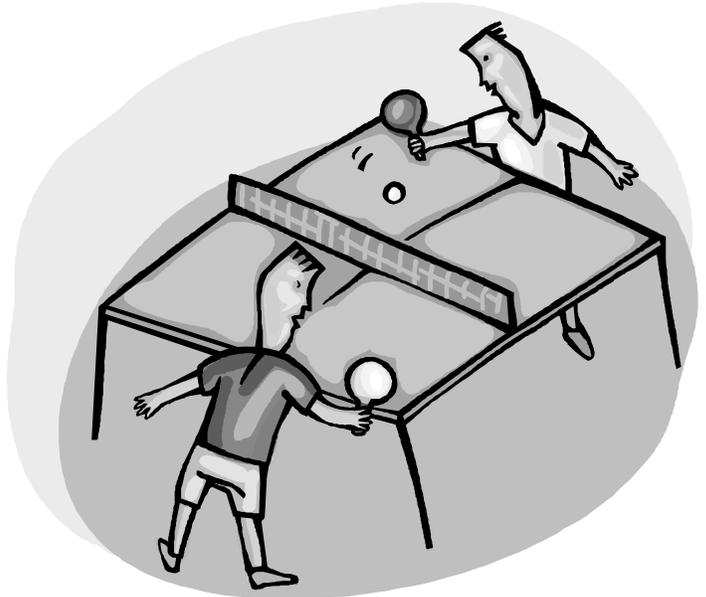
It seems like the hundredth time today your children have squabbled and screamed "He started it!" or "She did it!" and acted as though they hated, not loved, each other. Sibling rivalry strikes again. But before you feel like a failure or dream of a time when your children will be all smiles and hugs with each other, consider this: sibling rivalry is inevitable.

Through sibling rivalry, children can learn much about life and other people. They learn how to cope with negative feelings and how to get along with each other even when things aren't all rosy. Those childish squabbles help children learn that some negative feelings can be resolved; that life is not always fair; that ambivalence -- feeling love and hate at the same time -- is natural; and that anger does not necessarily get rid of love.

In fact, through sibling interactions, children learn some of the more difficult aspects of life within the safety and security of their families. They can fight one moment, and learn through that fighting, and the next moment feel again how good it is to belong together as a family.

Some sibling conflicts may occur just because the children are bored. Certainly, beginning a fight with a sibling is one way of getting a parent's attention. The trick for parents, though, is not to let it get too much attention. As much as possible, parents should let the siblings resolve their own problems. Parents may want to show understanding by acknowledging both children's feelings, but should avoid playing judge. You can say, "I know you're both frustrated, but I'm sure you can work it out."

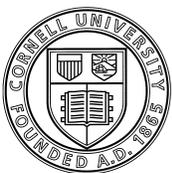
Attempting to parentally solve each instance of sibling rivalry may increase, not decrease, the problems, because much of the bickering may be intended to get your attention in the first place. It is one problem that, if ignored by you,



may diminish. Once your children realize you're not going to get involved, they may give up their attention-getting bickering or settle the arguments on their own. We can teach them the skills they need to resolve disputes on their own. Children can learn to express their feelings appropriately using "I statements." Show them how they can calm down when they're angry by counting to 10 or walking away. Teach them how to cooperate by taking turns or dividing materials or space in half. These simple skills can help children solve their own problems.

Parents also should not feed into the game of sibling rivalry by attempting to determine who started it. It's more important that children learn how to resolve it, on their own, as much as possible. Parents may need to ask, "How do you think you could work this out?" and provide initial support for negotiations. Help them calmly express their own ideas, then brainstorm solutions to the problem. Encourage them to choose a solution they both like.

~Continued~



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension
Orange County

Community Campus
18 Seward Avenue, Suite 300
Middletown, NY 10940-1919
845-344-1234
www.cce.cornell.edu/orange
Printed 8/2008

Parents should also avoid playing the "fairness game." If, for instance, an eight-year-old gets a larger bike for Christmas, his six-year-old brother should not get the same bike, just because "it's fair." Seven-year-olds shouldn't stay up as late as ten-year-olds because "it's fair." Life is not always fair and children are not equal. They are unique. Bigger children can handle bigger bikes; older children need less sleep. Children also benefit from knowing their parents will respond to each child's individual needs rather than treating them collectively. Trying to make all sibling rivalry a matter of "fairness" will result in more problems when children start to keep score and argue each point, big and small, as a question of fairness.

Parents should interfere in quarrels between siblings if it seems the children are becoming physically violent or verbally abusive. Siblings must not be allowed to hurt each other. When the squabble turns to kicking and punching, hair pulling, or name-calling, it's time for the parents to step in. Separate them and say, "I will not permit one child I love to hurt another child I love." It's important to intercede in the quarrel without choosing sides.

If the squabbling has been going on for so long, or at such decibels, that it's straining your ability to cope, you may also want to step in. Tell your children that, if they can't solve their problem, they will have to go where they won't disturb you or to separate rooms. Don't settle their quarrel for them. Just tell them you don't want to be involved in it at that time. It is sometimes surprising how quickly children end a quarrel when their parents are no longer paying attention to it.

Because much sibling rivalry comes from the children's competition for your attention and love, try this strategy to reduce sibling rivalry. Spend some time each day, even just 10 minutes, alone with each child. If your children can count on having some time alone with you each day, they may be less competitive at other times with other members of the family.

But don't expect to get rid of all competition. It's impossible and not even helpful to your children's development. Even though it may seem as if brothers and sisters will never get along or love each other, sibling relationships are among the strongest that people have. Perhaps all that squabbling helps fortify our appreciation of and commitment to siblings.

Source: Suzanne West, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County

HD 8