

A Note for Parents and Caregivers

Conflict between siblings is one of the most common parental complaints. You may wonder what you're doing wrong and if they'll ever outgrow it. It may seem like no matter what you do, someone ends up feeling upset or unloved. While kids say they want to be treated the same as their siblings, secretly, each child often wishes to be your favorite.

All siblings fight—it's perfectly normal. They disagree on what is fair, they compete, and they tease each other. Your job as a parent is to let kids work it out as much as possible, offer suggestions for solving problems when needed, and praise your kids when they resolve the conflict themselves.

Of course, being a good role model also is important. Kids learn by watching how you handle conflict and anger. Model and teach compassion if you want your children to show compassion to each other.

Other tips:

- Try to stop fights before they begin. Before dinner, for example, is a common time for sibling fights. If you can separate kids when they are angry, hungry, or tired, you will prevent many fights. Setting a schedule for items that need to be shared, such as TVs, computers, and video games will help.
- Give each child some time alone with you and with his or her friends. Too much together time can be hard on siblings. Don't expect them to interact cooperatively for hours at a time. If you give them more attention *after* the fighting starts, even if it's negative attention, you might be rewarding their bad behavior. Praise them for getting along well.

- Avoid labeling children. Referring to one child as the “good one” or “the apple of my eye” and another as the “bad one” or the “thorn in my side” not only can cause more competition and conflict between siblings but can damage their self-esteem.

When conflict erupts

As much as possible, watch from a distance when siblings squabble. It’s hard, especially if you think one child is taking advantage of another. But if you intervene too quickly, you suggest to kids that they cannot solve their own problems and that they should rely on you to solve them. They may never learn to resolve conflict themselves.

If your children are unable to resolve an argument productively, or you sense that one child is becoming overwhelmed or about to lose his or her temper, then you can intervene. But your role should be that of a coach, not a “fixer.” Listen to both sides and ask them to come up with solutions. If they are stuck, offer a few. Praise them for using constructive ways to solve the problem on their own.

When professional help is needed

Most sibling conflict is normal and will work itself out with time. If your children play well together at least some of the time, they will probably be okay. If one child bullies the others, fighting happens often and ruins family activities, or if a child’s self-esteem suffers, consider counseling. Ask your child’s teacher, guidance counselor, or healthcare provider for names of counselors in your area who work with kids. Family therapy can be an excellent way for kids (and parents) to learn new coping skills.