

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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SIBLINGS – RIVALRY AND REALITY

When a family has more than one child – which is true for most American families – some clashes among siblings are inevitable. Children can bicker about almost everything – borrowing stuff, having their own space, privacy, who controls the remote, who sits where, and most of all, who gets more attention. At the same time, children can also be loving, helpful and supportive of each other. Siblings who seem to be always locked in battle can grow to be true friends. Sibling relationships have a strong impact on development; they set the stage and provide a model for future relationships.

When and why does sibling rivalry begin?

Sibling rivalry can begin at an early age, often at the birth or shortly after of a younger child. Older toddlers and preschoolers, not used to competition, may feel that they are getting less attention from their mothers, and are likely to respond by demanding attention or doing something ‘naughty’ to gain it. Some children may return to earlier ways of behaving, such as wanting to sleep in a crib, wetting the bed, or reverting to ‘baby’ talk. Since all children need and want the love and attention of their parents, having to share with siblings can cause feelings of jealousy. For parents, attending to one child’s needs without neglecting other children is an intricate balancing act.

Sibling rivalry has benefits

Parents have great influence as role models, and they can demonstrate how to find solutions to daily problems and disagreements in ways that are respectful and not aggressive. Through give-and-take in sibling relationships, kids learn a lot of skills that transfer to peer relationships in schools and to other life situations. With parental guidance, children learn to:

- Share objects and parents’ attention.
- Deal with conflicts and disagreements.
- Understand and respect another person’s point of view.
- Show empathic behavior.
- Compromise, negotiate, and control aggression.

Sibling relationships and temperament

Children, even those in the same family, are different, and if parents are sensitive to their children’s individual temperaments they can ward off conflicts. Some children have a temperament that’s easy-going and they adapt comfortably to new situations; some children are slow to warm up; and some children are fussy, easily frustrated, and tense in new situations or in making changes. This last group are the children who are likely to experience friction with their siblings. This is true also for some children who have areas of weaknesses (in language, attention, or social interaction). When parents are attuned to their child’s temperament and needs, they become aware that certain situations may trigger conflicts among siblings. For example, in a new or transitional situation parents can prevent friction by strategies such as preparing a child in advance about what to expect, allowing time for gradual adjustment, or role-playing possible situations.

The climate of the family also makes a difference. If parents are empathic and work together, they model cooperation and assertive problem-solving. If parents have marital difficulties or if the family composition changes through divorce, remarriage or other circumstance, siblings may have more conflict.

What’s a parent to do? General suggestions:

- Establish and enforce a family rule that physical aggression and name-calling are unacceptable.
- Don’t allow your own feelings about your own siblings to color your reactions.
- Look for situations, even small ones, of sibling cooperation and helpfulness to praise.
- Don’t compare kids or hold one kid up as an example to others.
- Encourage children to think of solutions and not to depend on your intervention. (“We have this problem about which video game to buy, so let’s think of some ways to solve it.”)

- Plan individualized time with each child alone.
- Plan family activities in which all members can participate and contribute.
- Find a special area in which each child can shine.
- Do not force interaction and allow for play time without adult interference.

When there's a new baby sibling:

- Prepare the child in advance, but not too far; nine months is a very long time for a toddler to wait.
- If possible, avoid big changes in family life, such as moving, changing caregivers or starting a new school, around the time of the birth of a new baby. Such events can seem overwhelming and cause the sibling to associate a negative experience or change with the new baby.
- Create opportunities, such as helping with bathing or feeding, in which the sibling can be a participant.
- Plan time alone with the older child and review baby pictures with him/her to put things in perspective. Remind him that he was cared for in just the same way when he was born.
- Don't punish 'babyish' behavior. Accept it and comment that it may be good for a while to feel like a baby. Introduce some privileges available only to an older child – such as staying up later or spending time alone with one parent.
- Imitation and role-playing with a doll can help a child express feelings and adjust to the new situation.

On the front line – when fights become heated:

- With older children, become involved only if there's a possibility of danger or physical harm. Younger children may sometimes need a guiding hand to arrive at a solution.
- Separate the children until they calm down and can come up with suggestions on how the fight could have been solved or avoided. Don't try to decide which child is to blame.
- If children fight about the same issues (such as which television program to watch), help them work out a schedule showing which child chooses the particular program at which specific time.
- If fights between school-age children occur frequently, schedule family meetings to discuss family rules and review the family strategies for working out conflicts.

When to seek professional help

If sibling conflicts are so frequent and severe that they affect a child's functioning with peers or in school, contribute to marital problems, create a danger of physical or psychological harm to a family member, or are related to a psychiatric disorder (such as depression or drug abuse), consulting with a mental health professional would be helpful.

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ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.

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