

A Parent's Guide To Minimizing Sibling Rivalry

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"Mom, he is looking at me funny!"

"Dad, she's on my side!"

"It is mine! I got there first!"

"He started it! No, she did!"

Does any of this sound familiar? Sibling rivalry exists to some degree in virtually every family in which there is more than one child. The extent of the rivalry varies from family to family and even child to child. Some contributing factors to sibling rivalry are the individual temperaments of the children and their changing needs. Underlying sibling rivalry can be a competitive spirit and the desire to be the best or be the favorite. Jealousy such as a child thinking that his/her siblings are better, faster, stronger, prettier, smarter, etc. is common. Sibling rivalry may signify an insecure attachment or a lack of a sense of belonging to the family. More often, sibling rivalry stems from a combination of these and other underlying factors.

Parents can take heart in that although sibling rivalry does exist, parents can be proactive and help to minimize the extent.

Avoid comparing children — Each child was uniquely created by God with individual gifts, talents, and bents. Part of the joy of parenting is helping the child find his/her bent and nurturing that bent. The wise parent allows their children to be different from one another.

Avoid defining statements or labels — For example, when a parent says "her younger brother is the athlete in the family," or "his sister is the smart one" the child hearing these labels about a sibling can be negatively impacted and often personalizes the opposite label about himself/herself. The child may think "then I must not be smart" or "I must not be an athlete."

Praise and encourage all the children — Parents sometimes relate to each child differently. At some developmental stages, it can be harder for the parents to relate to their children. In times such as this, the parents may need to dig a little harder to affirm and encourage each child.

Set boundaries and limits on how children treat each other — For example, not permitting name-calling or negative teasing. Some teasing can be fun and other times teasing can cross the line and become hurtful. If the teasing is about something a child can not help such as a limp, stuttering, lisp or the like, teasing should not be permitted. In general, teasing should be off limits for the big three: weight, intelligence, and for girls, physical attractiveness, and for boys, physical strength. These three areas can hit at the core of children's insecurities.

Address conflict — It is the wise parent that has a flexible approach to conflict. Encourage the children to resolve the conflict themselves; however, if the conflict crosses the line to becoming physical or verbally hurtful, it is time for the parent to step in and help the children resolve the conflict. The wise parent will not take sides but instead will use this opportunity to teach the children how to give and take to resolve the conflict themselves. The parent can guide the children to set up a win- win solution. The focus should be on resolving the conflict and bringing about a peaceful solution and not on who did what to whom.

Regularly set aside individual time with each child — This time is very precious in order to get to know the child as an individual and the child to get to know each parent individually also. By nurturing this attachment, the parent will be helping the child to feel a sense of belonging to the family.

Avoid having the older child babysit the younger children in the family— When an older child is put in charge of a younger child, it can be a set up for chaos, even with siblings that tend to get along. An exception to this would be if there is at least 10 years in age difference, but even then the parent needs to use judgment.

Set a positive tone— Ultimately, the parents set the tone for the home. The marriage relationship is pivotal. If there is marital strife, the children are aware and often behave in reaction to it.

The good news is that relationships are dynamic. They can change over time and in different developmental phases of childhood and family life. Helping to minimize sibling rivalry can help children develop positive life long relationships with siblings.

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