

37  
**Sibling Rivalry**  
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# They fight all the time!

## Child Psychologist Jutta Dempsey unravels sibling rivalry

When your kids fight, it's upsetting for the whole family, but it's also a good opportunity for your children to learn how to handle conflict and for you to teach them important problem solving and emotional control strategies.

There are six major reasons why siblings tend to fight:

- Fights over toys
- Fights caused by children feeling crowded or needing more time alone
- Fights caused by children feeling slighted over fairness
- Fights used to get parents' attention
- Fights because kids are bored and restless
- Fights caused by physical or emotional meltdowns.

It helps to identify the reason for the quarrel so you know how to handle it at the time and also, so you can teach coping strategies to prevent it happening again.

As a family you should have agreed rules and solutions to cover most of the issues that end in quarrels. For example, what are the rules about special toys in your home and where they are stored compared to shared toys? How long can they play with a toy before sharing it? When a battle then erupts the children need only be reminded of the rules for them to be enforced.

To avoid siblings fighting over attention, have strategies in place for one-on-one time with each child. These should be on a regular basis so that any problems they have can be discussed and your relationship strengthened. If children don't get the attention they need they may get it inappropriately by telling tales, pretending to be hurt or escalating arguments by shouting or hitting until they can't be ignored. For children over four years, teach them to ask for attention appropriately by giving them the words to use or non-verbal cues that say they need your time. Then give them the attention as soon as you are free. This won't work for children under four years old who require immediate hugs and reassurance.

Quarrels caused by meltdowns are particularly difficult to deal with when they occur in public or at the "heated" time of day. Working out the message behind the meltdown is of utmost importance in rectifying and preventing one. For example:

- Is your child coming down with a cold, flu or other illness?
- Are you pushing yourself and the kids too hard?
- Are you expecting behaviour that is beyond your child's development?
- Has something upsetting happened to your child at school or day care?

- Is your morning or evening routine too hectic – does it need to be more child-friendly?

Prevention is the best approach, but when it happens then your response depends very much on the age of your children.

0-4 Years: Tune in to your child's physical needs and try to get them to do the same, even while they are quarrelling with their sibling. If they can use the words to tell you what the problem is, then reward them, such as "I'm hungry" leading to food. Plan all transition periods with routines and rituals in mind that involve food, rest and nurturing. It is important to separate the siblings initially if possible. Quiet time chairs are excellent to achieve this.

5-8 Years: Find out what is going on in a caring and concerned manner behind the scenes of the quarrel. Once the real problem is identified you can problem solve with them the best way to handle the upset, rather than taking it out on their sibling. It is important to do this after an emotional cooling, such as time out, so that your child can reason calmly.

Once you start treating conflicts as if they were opportunities, you are on your way to giving your children the best start.

**Jutta Dempsey** is a parenting expert and child psychologist for **Directions Learning and Behaviour Guidance**.