

## Sibling Combat

(all ages)

*“Everything was fine until you were born.”*

“Sibling rivalry” is sometimes too often dismissed as “normal”. Yes, it is normal, but sin is also normal and neither is harmless [see Genesis 4: 1-16]. Depending of the ages of the children, conflictual interactions between siblings can be extremely frequent, intense and even violent. Parental peace of mind is not the only casualty.

The intensity of the rivalry depends heavily on both the sex of the children and their age differences. In general, it might be said, the closer the children are in age the more intense the rivalry. On the other hand, a firstborn, who is accustomed to being the only child for a long period of time, may also take the birth of a second child with great difficulty. Other factors have to do with the emotional sensitivity of the children involved and the rest of the family constellation.

Sibling rivalry does not usually appear immediately. A new infant brother or sister is a novelty and often draws a good deal of attention and even gifts to the firstborn. However, as the baby gets up and around and starts to compete with an older sibling for the same toys and the same kind of parental attention, the potential for conflict heats up.

Parents primarily focus on the “bullying” by an older child of younger children because they are, legitimately, concerned about real injury of younger, smaller children. For children under the age of 4 years the obvious inequity of size and behavioral expectations is NOT at all obvious to them and they are truly shocked when the baby hits them in the face with a toy!) The young child, preschooler, is just learning the rules of behavior with his peer group. There is a learning curve on how to respond to a younger sibling’s “inappropriate” (in his view) behavior. Parents are prone to over-react to these events out of alarm at the violence and resulting screams of pain and anger. Learn to accept these as part of your job and handle the situation as matter-of-factly as possible. This takes an acting skill essential to parenting.

On the other hand, and quite frequently, despite the physical reality, it is the older child who is feeling more threatened by the younger child who is always cuter and commands more attention and leniency. A common scenario is that one child is temperamentally, even neurologically, more likely to react to provocation disproportionately. A hyperactive (ADHD) child or an anxious child easily distressed is likely to over react. The younger sibling, quickly and astutely realizes how effectively he or she is able to yank his brother’s chains and is thus deliriously empowered. He or she is able to distress the older sibling with just a look or a word and is able to do so undetected or seemingly innocently. If the older child overreacts and is immediately corrected by the parent the younger sibling is further empowered. He is on “crack cocaine” and the provocation of the older sib can

become something that is occurring many, many times per day. Parents often recognize the dynamic but despite frequent corrections of the overreaction of the older sibling are unable to break the cycle. Corrections of the younger sibling are often ineffective as well. **This is because the reward of being able to get a sibling, especially an older sibling, into trouble far outweighs the risk of being scolded instead of the sibling.** This means that the solution lies in disrupting the *cycle of reward* rather than negatively responding to the behavior. Since the reward is getting a sibling into trouble, parents must respond matter-of-factly, calmly, without scolding either child. In short, all of this provoking, crying and wailing is being done for your benefit. That is to say, because you, dear mother or father, are the intended and a primary audience. Many parents comment that the sibling rivalry is far less when mother is not in the house. Indeed, deep inside each of our brains “mother” is the big prize. Our sibling rivalry when we are younger is primarily about mother, in most circumstances, far less about father. [Many fathers believe that there is less sibling rivalry around them because they do not coddle the children as much as mother does. But the truth is that mothers and fathers have a very different place in the psyche of each child] Sibling rivalry about father becomes more potent later.

### **Step # 1      Low Key Response**

This advice is by no means to say that parents should “ignore” the screaming, crying, accusations or violence that has just occurred. Rather, they should *pretend* to ignore all of that and as matter-of-factly as they can muster and end it by sending each child in a different direction for a neutral task. Whether they listen to you or not is not your primary concern, as long as you get them separated WITHOUT ASSIGNING BLAME for the combat even if you think you are certain of who is at fault!

E.g. “Kevin, I need you to run downstairs and get your backpack. Sammy, come with me, I need your help in the kitchen.”

Comment:

This is said with as little emotion but firmly to each child with no indication whom you blame for the conflagration. Your immediate purpose is to get the children into different rooms without anyone being blamed or scolded or punished. This last part is crucial. ***It is the blaming the scolding and the punishing which feeds the compulsion*** for the children to erupt again into conflict as soon as your back is turned. If there is no blaming, scolding or punishing there is little motivation to provoke one another.

### **Step # 2      Timing is Everything**

Later, perhaps an hour later or later still in the same day or evening, meet with each child privately the conversation will go something like this:

**You:** “Tell me what happened today with you and Bobby in the family room.

*Allow child to complain all he wants about Bobby*

**You:** "Oh I am so sorry he did that to you! Is there anything you could have done instead of kick over his toys?" ["Hit him in the face"/"bite his ear"/"break his finger"]

*Problem solve with the child for alternative solutions. It is certainly permissible to express your dissatisfaction with his behavior but do not argue with him about whose fault it was. You will not change his mind about his brother's provocative behavior and your primary purpose is to discuss HIS behavior, not his brother's. You can end this discussion by commenting, "You know I will also be talking to Bobby." [but he will not witness this and will have no indication of how you handle Bobby!] <sup>1</sup>*

You will also do this with Bobby. Allow him to complain about his sibling. Ask him if he has any thoughts about a better way to respond or to protect himself.<sup>2</sup>

If there must be a punishment in your view it must be discreet. You may tell each child that you will be asking him to do an extra chore. You will tell him at the time that the chore is a consequence of his inappropriate behavior. But you assure him that no one else will know why you are asking him. It is extremely important that he is not humiliated in front of his brother. You will do the same with his brother. Make the chores roughly equivalent even if you believe that one or the other is more at fault.

But it is perfectly acceptable and even preferable that you do not focus on consequences to the behavior. At this time, you are making sure that neither child is rewarded psychologically for the provocation or for the response by the satisfaction of seeing his brother blamed and/or punished.

Sometimes when the conflicts seem intractable you may establish a behavior plan in which both children become aware that there will be a reward for both of them provided neither one of them gets into trouble. Now they both have a vested interest in the success of the other. The reward should be structured according to the guidelines for behavior plans. This handout is linked to the ***Windows of Opportunity Facebook Page***

<sup>1</sup>. This introduces the concept of *privacy* into your home. Some conversations are private and do not involve everyone.

<sup>2</sup>. For minor squabbles, the children themselves will learn to quickly resolve the issue without your involvement since they have learned from experience that there is nothing to be gained by escalating to the point where you have to intervene.

## **Reconciliation**

Apologies are an integral part of a happy home. They are usually done privately if the "crime" was related to sibling rivalry. Other times it is useful for the younger children to see how an older child apologizes and is coached on doing this correctly. Your expectations should be modest and there is much to be said for the same kind of timing you use in correcting your child. He will not likely respond

well if you demand an apology while he is still angry or in a state of disappointment. Wait until later, have a conversation with him and when the time seems right, you can say:

“I need an apology.”

“I need to know that you are sorry.”

“I think it would be good for you to apologize to your brother.”

Do not allow your child to use a “non-apology apology” as do the politicians. [I am sorry you were offended.” or “I am sorry the window got broken.”

Teach the child to say:

I am sorry for \_\_\_\_\_. The blank is filled with a clear statement of exactly what he did that was wrong and possibly the effects of his action on others. You will coach him on satisfactory wording but set the bar low and don’t beat it to death. You want a clear statement of his wrong doing, not an emotional catharsis.

You will respond: “I forgive you. Do you want a hug?” [Too many families dismiss the “crime” with “That’s OK” or “Never mind.” The wording should indicate that both parties benefit from the apology.

The purpose of this exercise is not to humiliate your child or to make him *feel* guilty as much as to teach him the intellectual honesty needed to recognize and admit when he has done wrong and the skills to deal with it in his relationships. If he feels guilty, all the better, but do not *demand* sincerity with the apology. That will come; and keep in mind that most children feel far worse than they let on.

When appropriate, you may need to say:

“... and I am sorry I yelled at you.”

Or

“... and I am sorry I blamed you for your brother’s part in this.”

Etc.

Generally, the “sun should not set on your anger” which is to say, try to complete all apologies and consequences, if any, before bed and allow the family to go to bed in true familial peace and to arise the next day with a clearly established clean slate. Night-time prayers are a good adjunct to this process and apologies may occur before or after depending on the emotional state of parent and /or child.