

Responding to sibling rivalry

Sibling rivalry begins the day your firstborn meets your new baby. It's not surprising. As an only child your firstborn received one-to-one attention. Now, when s/he seeks your attention, your first child often finds you feeding the baby, changing a nappy, or just gazing lovingly at the tiny intruder. It's not easy being the eldest!

Of course, the second child will come to argue, in time, that it's not easy being second, either! The second child is often the one to be hit and pinched by the jealous older sibling. And so it goes on. When the third-born appears, the second-born is busy fending off pinches from the eldest with one hand, while with the other hand s/he is handing out pinches of his/her own to the youngest. And of course, they'll all cry 'It's not fair!' – particularly when the older ones are allowed to stay up later or go out to places unsuitable for the younger children.

Is there anything you can do to ease the situation?

- Start from the beginning. When the new baby is born, buy a present 'from' the baby to its older brother or sister. Take care not to give so much attention to the baby that your child feels left out; and ask friends and family – tactfully – to do the same.
- Keep the lines of communication open. Listen carefully to what each child has to say about their feelings on an issue so that you are able to judge when a real wrong has been done. Help your children to listen to each other, too. In this way, they will begin to respect one another's points of view, and some conflicts will be resolved.
- Sometimes it's best *not* to get involved! – especially as children grow older. Try to judge when your children really do have a problem that needs your intervention, and when they are just arguing from habit, tiredness, hunger or simply to get attention. At these times, it's best to tell them to sort it out for themselves – or if the situation is getting out of hand, to separate them until they calm down.
- Decide on boundaries, and put into place certain rules so that your children know what behaviour is completely unacceptable to you. Let them know what the consequences will be if they cross the boundaries. For example, if you decide that swearing at each other is absolutely not allowed, then tell them beforehand that this behaviour will result in going to bed half an hour earlier, or a reduction in pocket money that week. And be consistent - once you've said it, stick to it!

- Encourage your children to 'make up' and apologise to each other, and not to hold grudges. You will need to be a good role model! Your children need to see that you apologise and hold no grudges in your own relationships with them and with others.
- Rewarding good behaviour always results in better behaviour than punishing bad behaviour! So remember to praise where praise is due, and always let your children know when you're pleased with the way they're getting on together. When they argue and fight, they get your attention – so make sure they also get your attention when they are being 'good'. If they've played well together and you're pleased – tell them!
- Try not to 'encourage' rivalry by appreciating one child's gifts above another's. So if one child is gifted academically, while another hates schoolwork but is gifted in practical ways, be sure to appreciate and affirm them both for their unique gifts.
- Attempt to have one-to-one times with your children so they feel special and valued as individuals. It may be taking one child to a football match one weekend, and taking another to the cinema the next weekend. Whatever it is, choose a trip that suits the individual child's interests and doesn't provoke more argument because one is getting something that the other isn't!
- Finally, remember that your children are not the only ones who argue and fight. Sibling arguments and fights such as those that happen in your home are happening in homes all around you. It's exhausting, but remember that every time a conflict is resolved, a lesson has been learned on the road to learning how to share, agree and cooperate.