

# Sibling Rivalry

How Creative Parents Use  
This Annoying Practice to  
Their Advantage



**BONUS**  
**1 Hour**  
**Audio**

How much fighting is normal?  
Where do I draw the line?  
Am I making it worse than it needs to be?

**Debbie Pokornik, BA, BSW**

Author of the award winning  
*Break Free of Parenting Pressures and Family Booster Shots*

***Sibling Rivalry***  
***How Creative Parents Use This Annoying Practice To Their  
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By: Empowering NRG  
Anola, Manitoba, Canada  
empoweringNRG.com

Recorded by: Debbie Pokornik

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## **Sibling Rivalry; Why Kids Fight**

Childhood is a time of learning and growing. A time when mistakes are made, boundaries are pushed and problems are solved. These challenges continue into adulthood, the only difference is, once we are adults people expect us to have learned some skills to deal with them.

Whether we like it or not, our kids learn most of these skills from watching us. When they see us lose our self-control to anger, or watch us calmly work our way through a problem, they are taking the information in and filing it away for future use.

When our children disagree with each other, we are being given an opportunity to really help them grow and learn. Unfortunately, many of us see these disagreements as a frustrating problem and deal with it by yelling, threatening, or punishing them for their behaviour. When we do this we are missing a great opportunity and actually creating further conflict.

The opposite extreme is when we witness their fighting and write it off as normal or unavoidable sibling behaviour. This can work out okay, if the children are naturally born with some skills, but if they are not (which is much more common) it can lead to frustration, anger, and resentment. Over time this can become damaging to their relationship with each other and with us.

Our goal when our children argue is to see these disagreements as a way to practice skill development. When we do this we remove most of the frustration and instead model the behaviours we would really like them to learn. The wonderful side-effect of doing this is that many of the petty arguments will disappear.

When we are aware of why our kids are fighting it becomes easier for us to maintain our self-control.

Common reasons kids argue:

- To get attention
- They feel an injustice has been done
- They spend a lot of time together
- The family is a safe group to vent frustrations on
- Their social skills are still developing
- They are tired, hot, hungry, stressed, grouchy or otherwise bothered
- They are full of energy and really enjoy the physical release

These reasons are understandable and provide perfect opportunities to do some teaching. While we might feel frustrated that our child is such an “attention-hound”, it does let us know that giving him attention for this kind of behaviour will not work in our favour. It also tells us that if we can teach him other (more positive) ways to get our attention our time with him will be more enjoyable.

If he feels an injustice has been done, it gives us an opportunity to turn judgment into curiosity and perhaps fix a misunderstanding. If our child craves physical outlets for his energy we might enroll him in recreational activity to help him do this. There is a lot of helpful information that comes from understanding why our children are going after each other. We just have to be aware of what’s going on.

It is important when looking at this list that we do not write off our kids’ behaviours as acceptable, just because it is understandable. A tired or hungry child, still needs to control her behaviour and part of our job is to help her understand that. As well, even though the family is a safe place to vent, it is not okay to treat people disrespectfully, even if it is her irritating little sister she’s being disrespectful to.

There are a few other reasons that kids will fight which tend to be a bit more serious in nature:

- Personality conflict
- To feel powerful
- They are jealous of their sibling
- They have a chemical imbalance that is interfering with their regular behaviour
- They have learned it is fun and are becoming a bully

These reasons are more serious, and, left alone, can result in damaging situations. They are harder to correct and can have very negative results if you do not. If you believe you are dealing with issues from this grouping it can be helpful to get assistance from professionals. Parent Educators, Social Workers or Family Centres are a few of the places you might go to seek help.

If you are uncertain what the cause of your children’s fighting might be seek out help to identify the cause, or try some of the generic techniques offered in this package. If the problem persists or gets worse over time, go for help.

Whatever you decide to do, it is beneficial to remember that siblings will have disagreements while they are growing up. This does not make them bad or defective and does not make you a bad parent. On the contrary these situations are gifts. They are opportunities to teach and practice important, life-long skills.

## Teaching kids how to fight with skill

When kids fight to get our attention we can respond in one of three ways:

1. We can react to their arguing, get involved, and reward them for this irritating and unwelcome behaviour.
2. We can completely ignore them, hope they work it out without bloodshed, and allow them to perhaps damage their relationship to the point of no return.
3. We can provide them with the skills and boundaries required to work out their disagreement effectively and then remove ourselves from the role of referee.

I'm a strong supporter of the third alternative as I believe it allows our children to learn important life skills and also provides us with an escape from their fighting. Before we can do this, however, we must make sure a couple of important pieces are firmly in place.

The first thing we need to do is ensure we have clear family boundaries. Boundaries are like the bottom line behaviours that will not be tolerated in our families. When it comes to sibling rivalry it is important to ensure our kids know what these are and what the consequences will be if they ignore them. Examples of things we might enforce are:

- Nothing physical: no hitting, biting, kicking, etc. You don't have to create a long list of all the possible physical things, but instead make it simple and enforce it consistently.
- No destruction of the other's property: destroying other people's property damages trust and often creates a "revengeful" mindset.
- No bullying behaviours: when you force someone to do your bidding by using size, strength, age, or other power to create fear, you are bullying.

Many people prefer boundaries be worded in a positive way; i.e. *No destruction* becomes *Respect other's property*, but when we do this we must make sure our kids clearly understand what they mean. When our kids are aware of our boundaries and the rules that enforce them, they will understand these rules are always in place, even when their sister or brother is pushing them to the limit.

The second thing we need to do before we can leave our kids to work it out alone, is to teach them acceptable skills. From a young age we can help them solve disagreements by modeling respectful communication and offering to help when they are stuck. As they mature, we wean them from our help so they can practice. The goal is to help them learn a variety of skills so when conflict arises they have tools to deal with it.

There are many different tools you can teach, but a few examples are: conflict resolution, problem solving, I-messages, being assertive, compromising, synergizing, negotiating, empathizing and respectful listening. If you are not familiar

with these skills there are many programs teaching them, and they are tools that can be helpful in every area of your life. For now start with what you do know and pay attention to what you are teaching.

A benefit of sibling rivalry is the opportunity to practice life skills. It is our job as parents to set up the boundaries to keep the fighting respectful and to provide the skills our children can use to work it out. With these pieces firmly in place, we still might not enjoy it, but at least we know our kids are actually benefiting from their time in the ring.

### **Five tips to decrease the fighting**

When our kids have been taught skills to work out disagreements and been made aware of family rules, we are in a good place to limit our involvement in their disagreements and as a result decrease the amount of bickering in our homes. Five tips to help you do this are:

1. Discuss any changes you are making with everyone ahead of time. Be calm and allow the kids to question the process. Adapt the wording to fit the maturity level of your kids.

“You all have skills for working out disagreements with each other and from here on in I’m going to let you practice them. Remember our house rules and understand it will always be in your best interest to work things out without involving me.”

2. When your kids start to argue, remove yourself from the listening zone. Acknowledge their disagreement and leave: “I know you two can work this out.” Disappear into your bedroom, bathroom – anywhere they can’t easily follow you. Read, exercise, or write a shopping list, whatever works to distract you. If the kids were after your attention the disagreement will quickly fizzle out.
3. When you don’t want to leave the room or can’t (i.e. in the car), use a statement like the one above and then put on your earphones, turn up the radio, sing, read (not while driving)...whatever it takes so they know you aren’t willing to participate.
4. Put a time limit on how long they have to work it out before you step in and decide for them. “You have five minutes to work this out and then I will make the decision for you.” Ignore them for the stated amount of time. If they work it out, compliment them and move on. If they are still arguing when the time is up, make the decision – which is final – and is never in favor of either child.  
**Your job at this point is not to help them both be happy... if you do this it will be your job for life!**

If they were arguing over a movie you might decide “no movie”... or a movie you know they both dislike. If they were fighting over name calling you might insist they both say three nice things about each other. If they try to argue with you add in three nice things about you too. If they refuse, send them off on their own (i.e. to their room) and only allow them to return when they have their nice things ready.

5. If you can tell things are escalating too fast, give less time (i.e. ten to thirty seconds) to work it out and then step in. They need some time to try and find their self control, but too much time could result in serious damage. After the allotted time calmly step in and use ideas like the following:

“You two just can’t seem to get along right now. Brianna, grab your book and sit here, Stephanie, take your drawing stuff to the kitchen and work there. Let me know when you think you’re ready to work together again.”

“You two need to sit down and neither of you may get up until the other one gives you permission to do so.” Or “You two can both go to your rooms and may not come out until the other one says it’s okay for you to do so.”

You may need to put something on the line to keep them from ignoring you (i.e. a privilege like TV time). These strategies work because the kids must work together (i.e. give each other permission) before they can move on.

A few extra pointers to ensure success with these tactics:

- During the initial meeting discuss what will happen if the argument keeps resurfacing. A parent imposed consequence might be necessary.
- Apologies are welcome but not a requirement of the process. Forced apologies are worthless and cause more grief than they are worth.
- Stay calm and enforce consequences. If you get angry the focus shifts from skill development to punishment to resentment.
- Be prepared for the kids to test this change. Be strong and know that what you are doing is definitely in everyone’s best interest.

Disagreements are part of every day life...it is critical our kids develop skills to help them deal with conflicts. If we can teach our kids how to work out their disagreements with each other, over time we will require our referee whistle less and less and our kids will be better people for it.

### Five ways to ensure you aren't adding to the problem

There are many things we accidentally do as parents or teachers that encourage kids to fight. Knowing what these are helps us avoid participating in them and adding fuel to the fire. Putting these five ideas into practice will help you decrease unnecessary arguments.

**Encourage telling, discourage tattling:** Tattling is one of the most frustrating behaviours kids do. Understanding the difference between tattling and telling is an important life skill, yet many of us fail to teach it.

Our kids need to understand two simple points:

- Telling is when you are trying to get someone out of danger or trouble
- Tattling is when you are trying to get someone into trouble

Responses that encourage tattling:

"What! Lisa was told to stay inside... you tell her to come and see me right now!"

"Who made this mess? Tell me right now or no story time for anyone."

"Bart, did you pinch Lisa? That's mean and unacceptable behaviour..."

Responses that discourage tattling:

"Are you trying to get Lisa into trouble or out of trouble?"

"This mess will need to be cleaned up before story time."

"Lisa, do you need some ice (or a hug) for that bruise?"

"Do you need my help to tell Bart how you feel about him pinching you?"

Don't get upset with kids for tattling, they do it because it can be very rewarding. Try to focus on keeping the door to communication open (i.e. responding respectfully) while guiding them in the right direction.

**Let bygones be bygones:** Think carefully before demanding an explanation when breaking up a disagreement between your kids. We often provide much sought after attention by asking questions and, without a video, may never know the truth. It's better to calmly do what needs to be done (console a hurt child, focus on clean up, discipline the kids) and forego the investigation. You can ask questions later if you feel you must, but understand you may never know the real story.

**Stay on the fence:** It takes two to tango and even the most innocent seeming child can be the instigator. You give that child a taste of negative power when you side with him or her. Discipline them both and they'll soon learn not to involve you unless absolutely necessary. Of course when you witness the interaction and know one person is responsible, deal with it accordingly, just be careful you are not choosing favorites.



**Small reactions give bigger results:** When you must remove one it is often more effective to take the one who is hurt. Refrain from making a big deal about it or you teach the kids it pays to yell loudest. Instead, remove the hurt child with a calm statement like, “Bart and I will work on his problem solving skills later, let’s you and I go put some ice on that bruise right now.” If neither child is hurt you might ask, “Can you two work this out or do you need me involved?”

**Let them think:** When we ask kids to come up with solutions we offer an opportunity to learn. Unfortunately it’s often easier to tell them what to do instead. Many kids would prefer we do all the work...but then what are they learning? The more work they do, the less likely they are to slip back into fighting mode the next time.

Two examples of ways to keep the kids thinking are: “Bart, can you think of an acceptable way to work out this disagreement with your sister?” or “It sounds like you two might need a cooling off period before you can play together nicely, do you need my help setting that up?”

Using the above ideas won’t stop kids from disagreeing, but it will provide them with an understanding of how much you are willing to be involved in their squabbles. It also allows them an opportunity to practice skills that will be important in every relationship they have.

### **In The End**

Doing all of these things will not eliminate sibling rivalry from your home, but it does give it a purpose and provides you with a constructive role to play when dealing with it.

So my advice to you...take a deep breath and relax, reframe these squabbles as a great learning opportunity and do what you can to use your referee whistle as little as possible.