

He Hit Me First!

Tips for Managing Sibling Conflicts

Conflicts among siblings are normal, and some sibling conflict is going to occur no matter what a parent does. Children aren't born with the skills needed to negotiate and resolve problems. For parents, fights and conflicts between siblings are a source of annoyance, but they also have the potential to be harmful, especially when they occur repetitively, include hurtful words, or result in physical pain.

There are 3 main reasons why siblings fight or quarrel which include the need for attention, companionship, and power. Children want and need their parents' time and attention. When children are missing out on time and attention from a parent they frequently resort to starting verbal or physical fights with a sibling. Can you think of anything that gets a parent's attention faster than the sound of a child crying, followed by the words, "He hit me!"

Children also need and want companionship from other children, especially as they grow older. When their attempts to engage a brother or sister in play are unsuccessful, they often resort to picking a fight or annoying their sibling to establish some sort of interaction.

And finally, siblings provide an opportunity to practice the use of power. Our homes are like a social laboratory where children get a chance to see what it is like to have power over another person. Sibling interactions provide a unique opportunity to experience being powerful and the consequences that may follow.

So what can parents do when their children quarrel or fight? Once a fight has started it is important not to assign blame to either child if the parent did not witness the hitting or event. Taking on the role of judge and jury is not advised. Instead it is more useful to intervene by staying calm and saying, "I don't know what happened here, but hitting is not okay in our family. It is clear to me that you two need to take a break from playing with one another. John you go to your room to play, and Tim, you go to den."

When a parent didn't actually see what happened and sides with a child, they end up giving power to the child who got hit or hurt. More often than not, younger siblings can be very adept at provoking an older brother or sister to the point of hitting.

As noted earlier it is important to remember that most children, especially children between the ages of 2 and 5, have not learned the skills that are needed to handle or resolve conflicts. Supervision is critical if parents want to prevent or reduce sibling conflicts. It is unrealistic to expect a 2 year old and a 4 year to play peacefully for extended periods of time. When parents take time to play with their children they can use the opportunity to teach valuable skills and coach their children on how to play together positively and resolve conflicts as they surface. Older school age children also need parents to model ways to treat each other with kindness and respect during play and how to resolve problems as they occur.

Family rules are also important in managing sibling interactions and reducing sibling conflicts. It is very important to have clear rules in place about hitting, name-calling, taking a sibling's toys, or entering a sibling's room.

Finally it is important for parents to think about how much individual time they are spending with each of their children. Many different behavior problems including negative attention seeking behavior, whining, talking back, and sibling quarrels can be prevented when parents schedule regular playtime with each of their children. Each child wants to feel they are valued and loved by a parent, and there is no better way to prove that than to make time to join each child in their world of play. Even scheduling 10 minutes of individual playtime with a child can make a difference.

Remember some sibling conflict is going to occur, but when parents supervise their children's interactions, have clear rules in place, and take time to give each child some individual attention, sibling quarrels and fights will be reduced, creating more time for family fun!