

Sibling rivalry

A sibling is a brother or a sister. It is acceptable that there are strong feelings, words and actions between siblings. Fighting and arguing between siblings is normal – it is how children learn to sort out problems and learn strategies they can use in other situations that is important. Rivalry between siblings is quite common and is part of how children work out their place in the family.

Temperament and personality have a huge impact on a child's ability to manage their feelings, especially the feelings of anger and frustration. Some children struggle with managing their anger and can trigger a reaction in another sibling.

Often fighting between young children decreases as they get older and learn more language and social skills.

Some facts about sibling rivalry

Sibling rivalry has been identified as more common among children who are the same gender and close together in age.

Rates of sibling rivalry are lower in families where children feel they are treated equally by their parents.

Australian research indicates that parents rate the quality of sibling relationships differently to how the children themselves rate them. Generally, a child's opinion of their relationship with a sibling is more optimistic than their parent's view of the relationship.

Competition between twins

This is heightened in the case of identical twins. Being compared and contrasted with each other seems to encourage competition and rivalry.

Low self-esteem, depression and jealousy are more likely if one child is out-performed by their brother or sister in some way. Studies have shown that a twin who is out-performed is likely to abandon an activity altogether to avoid direct competition, even if they show great potential themselves.

Preparing your child for a new sibling

The arrival of a new sibling is one time when strong feelings of jealousy and displacement can occur in the older child. It is natural that they may feel threatened and jealous. The parental attention that used to be theirs alone is now shared with another.

An older child has much to cope with when there is a new baby. Sometimes, the baby uses their bassinet and other equipment, and even gets the older child's baby clothes. The older child can act out feelings through their behaviour. Parents should try to react to the child's feelings, not the behaviour – the child will need reassurance and support through this challenging time.

It is difficult to prepare children under 18 months of age for a new sibling, because their vocabulary and comprehension are limited. Children older than two years could be told about the new baby late in the pregnancy.

Try to make practical arrangements for the baby ahead of time, so that your toddler is used to the changes when their new sibling arrives. Suggestions include:

- If your child is still using the cot, consider promoting them to a bed as soon as possible. If you wait until the baby is born, your toddler may resent the new baby for 'stealing' their cot.
- For some mothers, breastfeeding their older child as well as their new baby is natural and comfortable – there is no need to wean the toddler. However, it is important to breastfeed the new baby first.
- If you will be taking maternity leave or hiring a nanny, try to start these arrangements a number of weeks before the baby is due. This gives your toddler time to adjust.
- Make sure your toddler has familiar activities outside of the house – for example, consider starting them at playgroup or a similar activity.
- Involve your toddler before the birth – for example, talk about names for the baby, show them photographs of themselves as newborns and explain how the baby will need lots of help.

The jealous toddler

Your toddler may resent the new baby for taking up so much of your time and for not being big enough to play with. If given the opportunity, some toddlers may become rough with their new brother or sister.

Suggestions to prevent this include:

- This is a difficult time for children – they need parents who are understanding, loving and nurturing.
- The child is acting out their feelings through their behaviour and need their family to understand this and be supportive.
- Acknowledge the feelings the child has and give them plenty of love, hugs, support and encouragement.
- Praise gentle behaviour between your child and baby.
- Show your child how you would like them to behave. Be a role model.
- Accept that your toddler may regress in behaviour for a while as they struggle with their new situation and the accompanying feelings. Praise for age-appropriate behaviour will help.
- Offer your child special rewards or outings, so they realise there are some advantages to being the oldest child.

Sibling violence

On rare occasions, sibling rivalry can become violent, with one child's physical behaviour harming the other on a regular basis. The child who engages in physically harmful behaviour is generally the sibling who has the greater power or status – for example, being older or bigger. A family experiencing sibling violence needs to seek urgent professional help.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parentline Tel. 13 22 89
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 8387 0658
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria (24 hours) Tel. 13 22 29
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321
- Australian Breastfeeding Association Helpline 1800 686 2 686

Things to remember

- Sibling rivalry is normal. However, it can become a problem, particularly among children who are the same sex and close together in age.
- Rates of sibling rivalry are lower in families where children feel they are treated equally by their parents.
- A family experiencing sibling violence needs to seek urgent professional help.

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