Children and sibling rivalry

Summary

- Sibling rivalry is normal. However, it can become a problem, particularly 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.
- A family experiencing sibling violence needs to seek urgent professional help.

A sibling is a brother or a sister. It’s okay for there to be strong feelings, words and actions between siblings. Fighting and arguing between siblings is normal. It’s how children learn to sort out problems and develop strategies they can use in other conflict situations. Sibling rivalry is also 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 feelings of anger and frustration. Some children struggle with managing their anger and can trigger a reaction in another sibling.

Fighting between young children usually decreases as they get older and learn more language, tolerance and social skills. Some siblings will get on with each other all through their lives, and some will have years of getting on and then years of not getting on. However, some siblings with different personalities, temperaments and other issues between them may never really like each other or be able to get on.

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 and where their place in the family is respected and valued.

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

Competition between twins

Competition 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 an older child. It is natural that they may feel threatened and jealous. The parental attention that used to be theirs is now shared with another.

An older child has a lot 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. As parents, try to respond empathically 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.
and reassured of their important place in the family.

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, and they may feel 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 ongoing activities outside 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:

- Recognise that this is a difficult time for your child. Be understanding, loving and nurturing.
- Remember that your child is acting out their feelings through their behaviour and needs your support.
- Acknowledge your child’s feelings and give them plenty of love, hugs and encouragement.
- Praise gentle behaviour between your child and baby, and other behaviour you want to encourage.
- Show your child how you would like them to behave. Be a role model.
- Accept that your toddler’s behaviour may revert to baby behaviour for a while as they struggle with their new situation and the feelings that go with it. Through this behaviour they may be trying to recreate the time when they were the only child and felt special.
- Promote the positives of no longer being the baby – such as being able to do things for themselves, make choices and do things the baby cannot.
- 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.

If you are experiencing sibling violence in your family, seek urgent professional help. Relationship counselling is available through organisations such as Relationships Australia and Lifeworks.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parentline Victoria Tel. 13 22 89
- Kids Helpline Tel. 1800 55 1800
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria (24 hours) Tel. 13 22 29
- Family Relationship Advice Line Tel. 1800 050 321
- Australian Breastfeeding Association, Helpline Tel. 1800 686 268

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