

Preventing Sibling Rivalry: Real Advice on How to Keep Your Kids From Killing Each Other and Driving You Crazy!

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All siblings will fight from time to time, but parents can consciously choose to behave in ways that reduce competition and negative feelings between siblings. Two key strategies to reduce friction and rivalry among siblings are **acknowledging and empathizing** when children express negative feelings towards their sibling(s) and **avoiding praising one child in front of another**.

Having brothers and/or sisters is wonderful, but at times it can be frustrating, annoying, and maddening. Children always have a mixture of both positive and negative feelings about their sibling(s). Their feelings are normal and natural. However, many parents feel upset and troubled when one child expresses a negative feeling about a brother or sister. When negative feelings are expressed, parents may try to explain them away, diminish the feeling, punish or shame the feeling or give children the message that they are “bad” or “wrong” for having a negative emotion about a sibling. This response is not helpful and usually leaves the child feeling angrier or more hostile towards their sibling.

Brothers and sisters need to have their feelings acknowledged. In fact, **it is not until the bad feelings come out, that there is room for the good feelings to come in.**

Parents need to **acknowledge, accept, empathize** and understand the negative feelings.

- “I know you want me to read to you right now. You are angry because I need to be with the baby.”
- “It is frustrating to have to share your toys with your brothers.”
- “Your sister is getting a lot of attention right now. I see that you feel sad and lonely.”

Verbally validating a child’s feeling, let’s the child know you understand how they are feeling and that their feelings are okay and permitted. You don’t have to like their feeling or agree with their feeling, but empathy shows them you understand. When negative feelings are allowed, the emotion diminishes:

- The anger lessens
- The jealousy lessens
- The misbehavior lessens

Avoiding praising in the presence of siblings is another important strategy. Think of what happens when all of your children are together and you compliment or praise one child. Typical reactions include the other children trying to get your attention (“What about me?” “Do you like what I did?” “I can do that too”). The other children trying to show you that they are special too (“Look what I can do”). Or, children may respond with anger or jealousy; they may gesture or verbally put down the sibling who got recognition. Praising ends up fueling the competition and rivalry among siblings.

Praising is not necessary. Children naturally feel good inside when they work hard, accomplish a task, or achieve a goal. Parents tend to over-praise. We can acknowledge our children in many ways.

Watching our children, smiling, showing excitement nonverbally and making encouraging statements are ways to acknowledge and support your child’s efforts. If you feel you want to further talk about a specific accomplishment, find a quiet private time when the other siblings are not around. Making this shift will dramatically affect the family dynamic and lessen sibling rivalry.