

The Daily Parent

JUNE 2006

A NEWSLETTER FOR WORKING PARENTS

ISSUE NO. 40

SIBLING RIVALRY: Give Children What They Need

"I was first!" "That's not fair!" "Mine!"

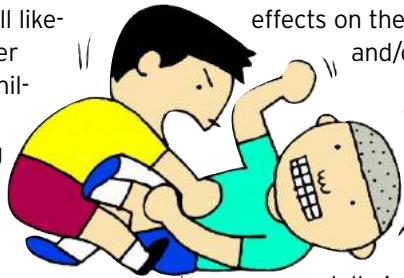
Parents with more than one child will likely hear this kind of exclamation over and over again. These are the yells of children struggling not to be left out, or making sure their siblings aren't getting better treatment.

Young children, especially up until age 5, are quickly growing in all the developmental areas—socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively. Part of social and emotional development for children is learning how to get along with others, handle and express their feelings, and being able to share and cooperate. For children in families with more than one child, home becomes the perfect classroom to start learning these social and emotional skills.

Having siblings helps children learn and practice how to cooperate, work out differences, and eventually understand that they will still get their needs met and are still loved, no matter how many children are in the family.

What's the Rivalry About?

Sibling rivalry is not new nor a serious concern. However, it can have lasting positive and negative



effects on the relationship between brothers and/or sisters.

Whatever you call it, the "rivalry" or "competition" or "challenge" between siblings is quite normal. It is human nature. You can see the same sort of rivalry among adults in many group settings, such as on the job or on teams.

The bottom line is that it's important for parents to remember is that sibling rivalry is natural and it is usually nothing to worry about. You can help make things easier for you and your children by knowing what is behind some of your children's feelings and actions.

Arrival of a New Baby

When a new baby brother or sister arrives in the family, it is a big deal. It brings up many feelings and concerns that most young children are not aware that they have or aren't able to put into words.

Children are continually forming a sense of themselves, and part of that self-awareness involves being part of your family. Children want to make sure they are loved and that their needs are being met.

How children react and relate to one another will greatly depend on their ages. How they get along with each other and handle disagreements will also depend upon how the whole family operates. Your parenting and family patterns play a big role in influencing the way your children will relate to one another.

Depending on the age of your child when the new

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baby arrives, you can expect different reactions. But no two children are the same, and that is key in both raising your own, and in helping them deal with new siblings.



Actively prepare your children for their new sibling. Younger toddlers and some preschoolers may not really understand that a new child will be coming. However, you can still set the stage beforehand by talking about the arrival of the new sister or brother. For school-age children, you can talk about what it will be like to have a new addition to the family and include them in getting ready.

Even if children are excited about having a new baby in the family, there will still be some challenging times.

What Parents Can Do

We know that sibling rivalry is normal and to be expected. So, what can parents do to make sure the rivalry doesn't get out of hand and that all their children feel accepted and loved? There are a variety of strategies you can follow. As with anything regarding children, there isn't a cookie-cutter approach, but there are some basic principles that will help in most cases. Knowing your children as individuals will always help you to know the best approach for them.

Prepare for New Baby

When a new baby is on the way, know that there will be changes. Make sure your expectations are realistic. You will have to change your family life. This translates into having a different amount of time to spend with the child or children you already have.

Helping Siblings Develop Healthy Relationships

Once the baby is born, the fun begins. Here are suggestions to help siblings have a healthier relationship.

- **Try to understand how your child is feeling and thinking.** Children do not think like adults. Telling them that babies need more attention may not make sense to them. Instead, make sure you make time for them as well. Tell them you will have special time to spend with them, and then do.

Here are some suggestions on helping your child(ren) prepare for a baby:

For Younger Children (Ages 1 to 4)

- **Read books to your child** on having a new baby in the family and what it's like being an older brother or sister.
- **Tell your child a new brother or sister is coming.** Talk to her many times before the baby comes. Show her pictures of babies, and let your young one talk about the baby.
- **Use language that will let your child know what to expect.** "When the baby comes, he will be sleeping a lot."
- **Let your child know how special they are and always will be.** Reassure them they are loved.
- **Buy gifts for your young one, as well as for the new baby.**



For School-Age Children (Ages 5 and above)

- **Talk to your child about the new child coming.** Show him his own baby pictures. You can read books with your child on what it's like to be an older brother or sister.
- **Talk about the important role your child will have in the baby's life.**
- **Be open and listen to your child's feelings. Allow your child to express negative and positive feelings and comments.** Children will have mixed feelings before and after the new baby comes. Help them to be comfortable with all of their feelings.
- **Include your child on preparations and activities.** Let him help pick baby items and presents.
- **Make sure you let your child know that you will still spending special time with them.** Then, make sure you do!

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BEING FAIR TO CHILDREN IS NOT THE SAME AS TREATING THEM EQUALLY.
TREAT YOUR CHILDREN AS INDIVIDUALS AND IN LINE WITH THEIR AGE.

- **Allow your children to voice their feelings and help give words to them** as well. Being able to express disappointment, anger, and jealousy is helpful to children as they learn to manage their feelings. It is okay to be angry. Some children may try to hide that they aren't thrilled with the new baby. But do not get upset if they do voice their strong feelings. Help them work through the feelings and reassure them that everything is okay.
- **Prepare your older child for when the younger one starts to explore.** Help your child to develop patience with their younger sibling. Having their belongings torn or knocked over can be upsetting. Help your older child to put their important belongings in a safe place.
- **Allow siblings to try to work things out as they get to be school-age or older.** However, never allow hitting, name-calling, or being abusive. Give suggestions to help them compromise. Keep an eye out for any type of bullying.
- **Be careful of young children around babies.** Young children do not have impulse control and may strike out and hit without any notice. Do not present opportunities and leave toddlers alone with babies. If they act out inappropriately, tell them: "I cannot let you harm the baby. That is not right."
- **Know that children who are tired, hungry or not active are more likely to start fights or be difficult.**
- **Let your older child help take care of the baby while you are present.** Assign him a special role.
- **Do not compare your children.** Comparing skills or achievements can affect a child's self-esteem. Pitting children against each other, as in sports competitions or other areas increases competitiveness.
- **Have older children teach their younger sibling a game or show them how to do something.**
- **Give positive attention to your children.** Some children pick fights because they don't know how else to get attention.



- **When children argue, listen to both sides.** When in doubt, get involved.
- **Be fair to your children. Remember: being fair to children is not the same as treating them equally.** Treat your children as individuals and in line with their age. Your older children may have different abilities than younger ones and may get to do more 'fun' things than younger children. Younger children may need more rest and have an earlier bedtime, and so on. Older children may have more responsibilities and chores.
- **Encourage children to talk things out and compromise.** Give them words to use to express themselves, especially young children. "I am angry." "My feelings are hurt." "I am upset because I can't do what Brian is doing."
- **Be an example to your children.** How you and the rest of your family handle disagreements, anger, and other feelings will likely be how your children handle them as well.

What Providers Can Do

The same basic principles of sibling rivalry also occur in the child care setting. You will find children competing with other for providers' attention, love and reassurance, fighting over space and toys, and looking to fit into the child care environment. The same suggestions are recommended for child care providers in helping children develop healthy relationships with one another.

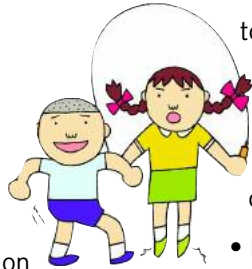
In most cases, siblings grow to depend on another and develop deep attachments. There will be ups and downs between siblings as they grow older. However, with guidance, you have a great impact on fostering loving and mutual friendships between your children.



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For More Information

- **Visit your local library** for children's books on new babies in the family and becoming a brother or sister.
- **American Academy of Pediatrics**, www.aap.org, has a section on parenting on their website that covers a variety of issues on raising children.
- **Sesame Workshop**, www.sesameworkshop.org, is a great resource for parents and caregivers on activities for children, developing healthy fitness habits, and also advice on raising healthy children. They have a newsletter on sibling rivalry which also lists other resources. www.sesameworkshop.org/newsletters/article.php?contentId=108280
- **Kids Health**, www.kidshealth.org, is the largest and most-visited site on the Web providing doctor-approved health information about children from before birth through adolescence. Created by The Nemours Foundation's Center for Children's Health Media, the site provides families with accurate, up-



to-date, and jargon-free health information they can use. There are literally thousands of in-depth features, articles, animations, games, and resources – all original and all developed by experts in the health of children and teens.

- **Kids Health Works**, www.kidshealthworks.com/category.asp?category_id=1, is a television program (sponsored by AAP) on the Discovery Health Channel for parents and has information on supporting emotional development and relationships in the home.

The Daily Parent is prepared by NACCRRRA, the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies, with funding from the Citigroup Foundation, New York, New York.
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