• family •

Why can't everybody just get along?

Here's what you can do to create some sibling harmony in your home

BY CATHAREN KANN

"Mom! Jack hit me! And he's cheat-ing!"

"I am not! Sarah just doesn't know how to play the game!"

Sound familiar? Should you: a.) Yell, "Jack, cut it out!"
b.) Give everyone a time-out.

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c.) Run and hide. Read on and discover the answers.

WHY DO SIBLINGS FIGHT ANYWAY?

"Why not?" says Deborah
Weinstock-Savoy, Ph.D., a licensed
psychologist who conducts parenting
workshops at WarmLines, Bentley
College, and around the Boston area.
They may be bored, tired, or hungry, or

they may not know a positive way to seek attention from their sibling, according to Kyla Boyse, RN, of the University of Michigan Health System.

But Weinstock-Savoy believes the main reason brothers and sisters fight is because, "Siblings are kids' first peer relationships," and there is so much to work out. Fighting is one way of connecting. In addition, stress, birth order, personality, and age all affect the sibling relationship.

Kids who are closer in age have both the potential for greater closeness and for greater conflict since their developmental needs will be similar, notes Weinstock-Savoy, PhD. Furthermore, she says, "When kids are similar to each other, there can be conflict around the similarity."

For instance, Maggie had harsh criticism for her brother Adam's parrot drawing. "What are those white spots on the wings? It's an ugly picture!" Her voice dripped with dismay and jealousy upon realizing her younger brother possessed a passion and skill for art, just like herself. Children compete to figure out who they are as individuals and to discover their own talents and interests, according to Boyse.

WHAT SHOULD PARENTS DO?

The first step towards easing the rivalry is for parents to examine the family routine in order to avoid children's becoming overly hungry, tired,

or bored. Ellen began to glance at the clock whenever her 5-year-old son Daniel was in the throws of an angry outburst, and realized it was always around 5 p.m. A healthy snack an hour earlier solved the problem. Children in a good mood are far less likely to start a fight.

In "Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too," Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish stress that parents should

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never compare children, never cast children into a role and never take sides in any sibling disagreement.

Weinstock-Savoy points out that doing so can cause resentment and is harmful to the siblings' relationship. Jill isn't going to feel friendly toward Laura if she resents her for being the "neat" child. Jack may feel guilty being typecast as the "smart, studious one."

Rather than take sides, a parent should think of him/herself as a mediator. It helps to encourage cooperation, not competition advocates Boyse. If the children are racing to get their pajamas on, have them race against the clock, not each other.

Parents want to be fair and treat all of their children equally. Paradoxically, although fairness is good, it does not mean doling out equal shares of material goods, time, and love. "Equal is less," say Faber and Mazlish in "Siblings Without Rivalry."

"Even if you are able to do everything totally equally, your children will still feel as if they're not getting a fair share of attention, discipline, or responsiveness from you," says Boyse. "I love you the same as your brother and sister," will never satisfy a child. S/he needs to know that s/he is loved uniquely, say Faber and Mazlish. "You are the only you in the whole world. No one could take your place." Recognizing a child's special individuality includes listening to each child and acknowledging that it is okay for them to hold different thoughts, feelings, and opinions than ours, emphasizes Weinstock-Savoy.

Instead of trying to be equal, "Give according to individual need," say Faber and Mazlish. If you buy new sneakers for your daughter who has outgrown her old pair, don't feel obligated to helped your little sister put on her shoes this morning," for instance. That way the positive interaction will not be interrupted and will remain authentic.

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buy a pair for her younger sister automatically. The 2-yearold's piece of cake should be smaller than the 7-year old's. A parent may spend more time with one child planning her birthday. Then spend time with the sibling later doing an activity he likes, but don't try to make it equal. The sibling will understand that he will get the special birthday treatment another time. "It is OK to give kids their day in the sun," says Weinstock-Savoy. Kids may say something is not fair, says Weinstock-Savoy, but usually what they are really asking is, "Can I count on you to pay attention to me when I need it?"

Spending quality time with each child will go a long way toward easing sibling rivalry. Studies show that 15 to 20 minutes of one-on-one attention with a child each day will reduce whining and aggressive behavior significantly, according to Lesia Oesterreich, Family Life Extension Specialist for Iowa State University and the National Network for Child Care.

Parents should look for opportunities to praise a child's unique skills and good behavior, especially when one sibling does something nice for another. Weinstock-Savoy believes it is best to do such complementing aside, after the observed event. "I liked the way you helped your little sister put on her shoes this morning," for instance. That way the positive interaction will not be interrupted and will remain authentic.



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This picture of sibling civility could be yours. From examing your family routine to knowing when to intervene during arguments, parents can help pave the road to some harmony.

Is it realistic to expect your children to become close friends? Probably not, though we can hope. However, respect and civility toward one another is a realistic goal, agrees Weinstock-Savoy. Siblings will fight, so it is important to establish clear family rules for fair fighting, such as no name calling and no hurting, she says.

Faber and Mazlish also assert that brothers and sisters need to have their negative feelings about each other acknowledged. In "Siblings Without Rivalry," they encourage parents to teach siblings appropriate language expression by paraphrasing siblings' emotionally charged statements. When Thomas says, "I hate Jared! He stinks!" the parent can say, "You sound like you feel really angry at Jared. Why do you feel that way?" "I feel furious at Jared because he wrecked my Lego house and I wanted to save it to show Daddy!" Teaching siblings how to express themselves in an assertive, not aggressive way, helps prevent harsh feelings toward each other. Parents can encourage healthy relationships by mod-

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behavior.

So is it possible for a home with children to be filled with peace at every moment? No, but neither does it have to resemble a war zone. We can teach our children how to

build positive relationships with one another, skills which might make a pleasant family dinner a daily reality, and result in even more benefits in the years to come.

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