

# When Siblings Won't Stop Fighting

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How parents can keep the peace and help kids learn to resolve conflicts

Katherine Martinelli

**A**nyone with more than one child knows that even siblings who are the best of friends can still get on each other's nerves. And it's certainly understandable — they're forced to live under the same roof and spend much of their free time together. Inevitably, they are competing for limited attention and resources. Who wouldn't get irritated in that situation, at least once in a while?

But what's a parent to do when things escalate and it seems like the kids are fighting constantly? It can make the home feel like a battlefield, and the adults more like peace negotiators than parents. Fortunately, Dr. Stephanie Lee, director of the ADHD and Behavior Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute, says there is a bright side. While sibling squabbles can certainly be stressful, "having siblings gives kids good practice for social skills that they need in the real world. If parents see these things as opportunities to teach, that can be really positive," says Dr. Lee. Learning to healthily navigate conflicts with siblings can teach kids about things like **taking turns, sharing, body autonomy**, when to turn to an adult, and using words rather than physical force to solve a problem.

Here are some things parents can do to help keep the peace in the home.

## Get at the root of the conflict

So often parents end up playing referee, breaking up fights and calling fouls as they happen — over and over and over again. But to truly break the cycle, it's crucial to take a step back and try to get at what the root cause of the conflict might be so you can address that instead. For example, if it seems like your kids are always fighting over toys, try to **look for a pattern**. When does it happen?

Dr. Lee points out that frequently siblings will start fighting over a toy seemingly out of nowhere, after a brief period of peace. "What the kids might really be fighting for is their parents' attention after they've played nicely for a long period of time," says Dr. Lee. "Kids aren't really so concerned about the toy, it's more that they've figured out these **patterns of behavior** that when I yell, when I kick, someone gets involved immediately."

## Praise the positive

Laying some positive groundwork may help reduce these negative behaviors. This can be done by shifting the

collaboratively,” suggests Dr. Lee. “Get involved proactively to say, ‘I see you guys sharing that toy,’ or, ‘Wow, great job taking turns,’ or, ‘Wow, I love how you guys are playing together.’” Letting them drink up that **positive attention** may help to reduce their need for negative attention later.

“For every time you catch them fighting, you want to catch them playing nicely together three to five more times,” notes Dr. Lee. “We want to encourage that in order to really change their behavior.”

## Make a plan

Of course, even with all the positive reinforcement in the world, siblings will still fight. Another thing that parents can do ahead of time is to coach the kids — often the older sibling, in particular — on how to respond in a productive way rather than escalating a conflict. For example, you might let your child know that if her sibling hits her or snatches a toy she should come and **calmly** let you know rather than retaliating. Or if a younger sibling is always knocking down structures, for example, the parent can coach the older sibling to go in a separate room to build, or to build structures specifically for the other to destruct.

Also, parents can make clear that there’s a difference between running to a parent every time there’s the slightest disagreement and **seeking help to resolve an issue**. And, of course, they should alert an adult if a sibling gets violent.

If there’s a constant source of conflict, making a plan can help ease the tension. Dr. Lee works with a set of older siblings, for example, who always fought over who could sit in the front passenger seat of the car. So they made a plan that both kids agreed on: one sibling got to sit in the front seat on even days and the other kid got odd days, and that was that. They **knew what to expect** and had a predictable solution that remedied the conflict.

Setting a timer for taking turns with a coveted object is another great, actionable tactic. And it’s important to be clear on what items should be shared and what can be reserved. Is a brand new toy off limits? Certain special items? Parents can give kids each three stickers, for example, to put on three special things that are off-limits, which can be switched as their moods and likes change.

The important thing is to be clear and consistent, and to set up predictable outcomes — all while praising them any time they do a great job with it. “The more proactive you can be the better off you’re going to be in terms of setting the stage for success,” advises Dr. Lee.

## Tootle, don’t tattle

Another way to create a more positive social dynamic is to celebrate tootling rather than **tattling**. Tootling, as Dr. Lee describes, is calling someone out for positive behavior. So for example, encourage your kids to come and tell you when their sibling shares a toy or demonstrates kindness, then make a big deal out of the positive actions of both children. Depending on your family culture you may want to start a penny jar that gets them pizza night when it’s full, or have some other means of documenting all the good deeds.

Even with all this in place, there are going to be times when the kids are playing tug of war with a toy and it feels like the only way to intervene is to remove the source of conflict. Dr. Lee says that it's totally fine to do that, but to make sure you give the toy back to them within a few minutes and give them a chance to practice using it appropriately — otherwise they aren't really learning how to work collaboratively. This may mean getting them to agree to taking turns with the help of a timer then praising them when they do a good job.

## Forget fair

“That’s not fair!” is a common cry of children of all ages, and it’s easy for parents to get caught up in making sure that everything is on even footing between siblings. But as Dr. Lee points out, life isn’t fair and it’s not realistic that every single thing in the home be equal at all times. The older kid may get to stay up later, and while the younger kid may feel that this is a great injustice, “it’s up to the culture of your family and what you’re comfortable with,” she says.

If there’s discontent over something like this, parents can explain the logic behind the “unfair” exception, but “we don’t need to give explanations for everything,” says Dr. Lee. “If that’s the rule, that’s the rule.”

Parents can model dealing with unfairness by sharing stories with their kids about things that seemed unfair to them and how they dealt with it. For example, someone at work gets more vacation days because they’ve been at the organization longer. That can feel unfair, but they can understand why it works that way.

But generally, Dr. Lee says, “I find with kids they actually end up saying ‘that’s not fair’ not so much because they’re so concerned about fairness, but actually because that’s what gets their parents to attend to them.”

## Special needs

And what about when **one has emotional or developmental challenges** that may demand extra attention or accommodations? Dr. Lee says to approach this situation similarly: with forethought, planning and lots of positive praise.

Talking openly about the issues their brother or sister may have is important for siblings, as well as listening carefully to their concerns and feelings. Behavior that’s difficult or disturbing is less upsetting — and less likely to incur retaliation by the sibling — when it’s understood that it’s not willful.

Being generous with support and encouragement can also help keep a sibling from acting out to get attention. If one kid needs a behavior sticker chart, for example, offer one to the other kid as well. Also setting aside special one-on-one time with each sibling when possible — even just a monthly breakfast date or five-minute game of tic-tac-toe — can go a long way towards making everyone feel important.

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