

### Handling Sibling Fights – Primary School

**Some sibling fights are a fact of life. After all, your children are still learning how to get along. When fights happen, the main thing is to stop them before somebody gets hurt. Then it's time to help your children deal with the issues constructively.**

#### **Sibling fights: when to step in**

Sometimes it works to stand back from a sibling fight for a while, because this gives children the chance to sort it out for themselves. But it's important to know when to step in to break up a sibling fight.

**When a disagreement gets physical or involves shouting or nasty remarks or name-calling, you need to break it up before someone gets hurt.**

Lots of attention might actually reinforce fighting. That's because children love any kind of attention, even attention for bad behaviour. If you're going to give children attention when they fight, try to use the opportunity to help them learn skills for [avoiding fights](#) and solving problems in the future.

#### **Breaking up sibling fights: steps**

Here's what to do when a fight breaks out:

1. **Stop the fight before the crying starts.** This might require physically separating your children, or sending them to opposite sides of the room to settle down.
2. **Keep your cool.** This might sound impossible, but the idea is not to make things worse. Try to save your energy for giving positive feedback on behaviour that you want to encourage.
3. **Tell children you'll talk about it later.** Children are often too upset to take in what you're saying at first. Wait until things cool down before you talk about the issue. This could even be the next day with older children.

If a fight breaks out while you're driving, always pull over. Turning around to talk to children or separate them takes your attention off the road.

#### **Handling sibling fights constructively: tips**

These tips can make it easier to cool things down when sibling fights break out:

- **Treat all children fairly.** But remember that fair treatment isn't necessarily the same treatment. For example, it might not be possible to treat a six-year-old and a two-year-old the same.
- **Avoid negative comparisons.** Saying something like, 'You should have known better because you're older than him' or 'You're the troublemaker' can make a child feel even more hurt or resentful.
- **Identify the cause of fighting.** This helps you work out the best thing to do. For example, if a child has taken a toy from a sibling, you need to step in. If you don't, the child learns that fighting is a way to get what you want. Keeping an eye on your children is the secret to knowing the reason for the fighting – and deciding on the right way to deal it.

- Use [family rules](#) to make expectations about behaviour clear. You can remind your children of the relevant family rule and follow through consistently with any [consequences](#).
- **Have a plan.** This means thinking about how you'll handle small disagreements as well as big fights. For example, you can help children work out small disagreements together, but you might decide to use consequences for fights involving physical violence, or for fights that happen after you've all agreed on a solution to a problem.

#### **Problem-solving after a sibling fight: steps**

What you do after a fight can help children learn how to solve their own problems in the future. For best results, wait until tempers have cooled and children are ready to reason again.

1. **Let children know what you plan to do.** For example, 'I've decided that neither of you should use the computer until we can find a way to stop the fighting. Do you understand? Are you willing to work on solving the problem now?'
2. **Ask both children to say what they think the problem is.** Encourage them to try to see it from the other person's point of view as well as their own. You could tell them that two people might still disagree even when they both have valid points of view.
3. **Ask both children to say what they want to happen.** You can also help them think about their expectations. For example, 'Tegan, is it fair for you to have the computer all the time?'
4. **Brainstorm together.** Let the children go wild with ideas on how to solve the problem, and encourage them without judging their ideas. Throw in some ideas of your own, and write them all down.
5. **Rate the ideas.** Start by asking the children to think of which ideas won't work. Then look for the solution with the most benefits and the least drawbacks. For example, 'Does anyone think this might work?' 'What would be good (or bad) about this?'
6. If you can't come up with a solution at first, **come back later.** You can ask the children to go away and work out some ideas together, or ask other people who have had similar problems. Or you might look for ideas in parenting books or websites.
7. Once you've all agreed on an approach, **try the solution and see how it goes.** Start again if things don't improve.

#### **Handling your own emotions**

It's normal if you feel stressed when fights break out. It's also normal if some issues bother you more than others, and some days you get upset more quickly.

But staying calm can really help. If it's safe and you don't need to step in immediately, it can help to **stop, count to 10, and then act.**

That extra 10 seconds is often enough to calm your emotions. If this doesn't help, you might want to ask another adult to handle things while you take some time out.