

SIBLING FIGHTING

Conflict itself is not harmful, but the way disagreements are resolved is the issue that generally concerns parents

What do you do if your kids fight and argue with each other? Do you make a plea for peace, order the combatants to their bedrooms or lay the blame on the child who caused the infraction?

It is almost impossible to stay out of kids' fights because they are usually noisy and invariably one child will call on mum or dad to intervene.

My research indicates that sibling fighting is a concern to parents in three out of every four families with more than one child. Certainly this is the issue that most parents want to discuss when they come to my parenting seminars.

It is important to have a realistic attitude to children's disputes. When adults live together under one roof there are bound to be disagreements. Why should children be any different?

LOOK AT THE NATURE OF MOST DISPUTES

They generally begin as a disagreement over some minor issue such as the choice of television programs, the result of a game or a refusal to share. The issues children fight over may be minor but the resulting disturbance of the peace can be extremely hard for parents to deal with. They often occur when we are busy and have little time to handle them effectively.

KID'S FIGHTS USUALLY HAVE A NUMBER OF PREDICTABLE PHASES

The first is the quiet stage when one child annoys, niggles or even criticises another. The dispute enters phase two as the noise level rises and children become agitated or belligerent. The fight is now almost in full swing so parents need to brace themselves for stage three which is the moving phase when the fight shifts from one area of the house to another accompanied by the use of insults, shouting and door slamming. It may even become physical.

The fight usually climaxes when one or all parties involved come to you in tears, telling tales or looking for justice with that old line, "Mum, she hit me and I didn't do anything." It is probably time to reach for the walkman, turn the volume up on the television or make yourself scarce. Anything for some peace and quiet!

TWO APPROACHES

There are two broad approaches that parents can adopt with kids fighting

- become involved or remain neutral. Your approach will depend on the age, maturity and ability of your children to sort out their own problems, your ability to ignore noise and your beliefs about how conflict should be resolved.

Australian psychologist and parenting authority Dr. Maurice Balson in his book "Becoming Better Parents" recommends that parents leave children to resolve their own disputes. Balson maintains that children's fighting is for the benefit of their parents and when we intervene to adjudicate or punish the guilty child we are doing exactly what the children want us to do.

This approach makes a great deal of sense, but as most parents know, some fights are impossible to ignore particularly when they happen under your nose.

If this is the case make a swift retreat when children fight or invite them to resolve their noisy disputes outside. Many parents have found that arguing and fighting practically disappears when children are consistently shown the door to the backyard.



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THE NON-INTERVENTIONIST APPROACH

Allow kids to work out the dispute themselves.

Bear it – Put up with the dispute if possible.

Beat it – Retreat to another part of the house or outside

Boot them out – Outside is the place for noisy disputes.

THE INTERVENTIONIST APPROACH

Children often need parental assistance to help them resolve their disputes amicably.

When children want you to intervene in their disagreements let them know that you are willing to help them work out a solution, but avoid taking sides. Establish what the fight is about, rather than who started it, and offer suggestions to resolve the issue.

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS FOR YOU TO THINK ABOUT WHEN YOU ASSIST CHILDREN TO RESOLVE CONFLICT:

1. Focus on emotions first.

Emotional containment is a priority here. Get kids to calm down before you help them work out their problems. This may mean they sit for a while on their own or go outside and let off steam physically. Once emotions are contained then you can get down to business.

2. Focus on the problem not the fight.

Kids will want parents to punish their sibling for beginning a dispute or infringing on their rights. Drill down onto the issue (e.g. a better way of watching TV, sharing toys or whatever) and focus on resolving that. Direct children to focus on the issue not the fight.

3. Listen to their story.

Kids generally want to be heard so listen to their side of the story and again, try focusing on how they feel about it. Give their emotions a name or label. "It sounds like you are pretty

angry about it. Would I be right?" Sometimes this is enough to get a resolution to an issue. "Okay you can play with my old toys but I don't want you playing with my new toys for a while. They're special." "Okay."

4. State the problem as you see it.

When kids are stuck tell the problem as you see it. Try to develop a sense of 'other' here by showing how a child's behaviour affected his or her sibling, without using shaming or blaming. If you can brainstorm a solution so be it. Otherwise they can agree to disagree and stay clear of each other.

5. Restore the relationship.

Keep the relationship as the focus rather than focusing on the problem. With young children the issue they were fighting about is generally long-gone by the time a parent intervenes. An apology, a hug, a joint treat (and no I am not suggesting rewarding poor behaviour) or redirecting kids' attention elsewhere are some ways to help restore the relationship between the kids.



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