

Sibling Rivalry

Kimberly Harg

Since the beginning of time, sibling rivalry has played a part in families. From Cain and Abel and *The Taming of the Shrew* to *Fraiser* and *Malcolm in the Middle* -- all share the same underlining sibling rivalry theme.

KidsHealth.org, an online resource for children's health information held a kids' poll and asked 1,245 children, ages 9 to 13, about conflicts they have; conflicts with siblings ranked no. 1.

D'Arcy Lyness, PhD, child and adolescent psychologist and medical editor for KidsHealth.org, says polls are conducted on a regular basis on topics relevant to kids. She says it is not surprising that children fight most with their siblings since that is who they spend most of their time with. In her opinion, these conflicts can be a good thing.

"It is a practice ground that will help them resolve conflicts with other people later in life, like friends, co-workers and spouses," Dr. Lyness says.

One third of the kids in the poll said they talk it out with their siblings, but the remainder said they resolve it by getting physical or saying verbally abusive remarks. She says there is a lot parents can do and should do when arguments lead in this direction.

"Parents need to be involved," she says. "A referee is not the best way to teach conflict skills. Parents can help them find a fair resolution but not fix it for them."

She says parents can help guide conflicts and remind children to play fair. Some children are more naturally inclined to do this and others by nature have trouble managing their anger and frustration, so they may need extra help to curb their temper. It is also important for parents not to get upset when their children fight and to set a good example by resolving arguments calmly amongst themselves.

"Nobody comes with these skills. It is practiced and learned over time," Lyness says. "The most important thing parents can do is set guidelines. Make it clear what they can do and what is not acceptable."

Dr. Paul Donahue, director of Child Development Associates and author of the new book *Parenting without Fear* (St Martin's Press, August 2007), has

been in practice for 15 years. He says sibling rivalry is not uncommon, but parents should also not assume that their kids won't get along. Although bickering and some fighting are normal among siblings, many children have caring relationships with their brothers and sisters. If parents can reframe the discussion and think more about how to encourage sibling bonds rather than discouraging rivalry, they will be more likely to find that their kids can rise to their expectations.

"Parents can also work hard to let each child know that they are special and have a niche in the family. One might be good at sports, another a talented musician, a third a helpful cook in the kitchen. If we recognize that each child has strengths that are valued in the family, we can limit the amount of jealousy brothers and sisters feel toward each other," Donahue says.

Donahue warns parents to be careful not to compare kids, either implicitly or directly. Kids are quick to figure out what their parents really think of them, and these good/bad comparisons can be hard to shake and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"Usually children vie for attention in the family, especially from their parents, and siblings are often sensitive about who is capturing more of the limelight," he says. "Brothers and sisters typically have their own unique talents that are recognized in the outside world as well, and are likely to be more or less academic, athletic, musical or artistic than each other. This can cause a good deal of jealousy."

He agrees with Lyness that siblings share a lot in common but are individuals and can have markedly different temperaments.

"A fairly intense, high energy and moody older brother might have a quiet and shy younger sister and they may not naturally click with each other. In addition, if parents treat siblings as if they are a uniform entity (as in "We're a big sports family" when not all the kids love athletics), one of the children is likely to feel shortchanged and misunderstood and resent the others," he says.

Some studies suggest that sibling rivalry is more intense when children are close in age and of the same gender, but Lyness says it varies family to family. According to her, some families are more conflict-prone.

Donahue says adolescents tend to be more moody and less tolerant of their younger siblings and more prone to picking fights and arguments, but often it depends more on a particular child's temperament rather than their age or sex.

What if a child is used to having all the attention and then that suddenly changes with the arrival of a new baby? Donahue says the best way to handle this is to re-assure the older children that their parents will still have time for them and that their needs and interests won't be forgotten.

"Parents can set aside 'special time' for 20 to 30 minutes three or four times a week that is dedicated to doing whatever that child wants. They should also let the older kids know that it is OK to have mixed feelings about the new baby and that they will probably be a little resentful of all the time and attention he or she requires," he says.

Merging families through a marriage needs special care and attention as well. Donahue says parents can first re-assure everyone that they will be treated fairly. Each will have similar jobs and expectations based upon their age and everyone will be expected to pitch in. Things will not necessarily run smoothly at the beginning and children should be forgiven if they don't instantly bond with their new siblings.

"When it comes to separating step-siblings in conflict, it is usually more appropriate for the biological parent to be the one to discipline their own kids," he says.

Lyness says the main thing to remember when families combine is being aware of each of the children's needs and to give individual attention to each child. Donahue and Lyness both agree that parents serve as the most important models of behavior for their children. With love and understanding, most of the time arguments will work themselves out.

"If the conflict at home is unrelenting or if children are becoming more physically or verbally aggressive even after parents intervene consistently, parents should think about family therapy or a consultation with a professional who specializes in family conflict resolution," Donahue says.

According to *Psychology Today's* 1993 Jan./Feb. edition, "The sibling bond is often complicated and is influenced by factors such as parental treatment, birth order, personality, people and experiences outside the family."

