

## **Sibling Rivalry**

Sibling rivalry is often about conflict. In fact, our sibling is one of the first people we will routinely have conflict with. The truth is, when any two or more people spend lots of time together, conflict is inevitable.

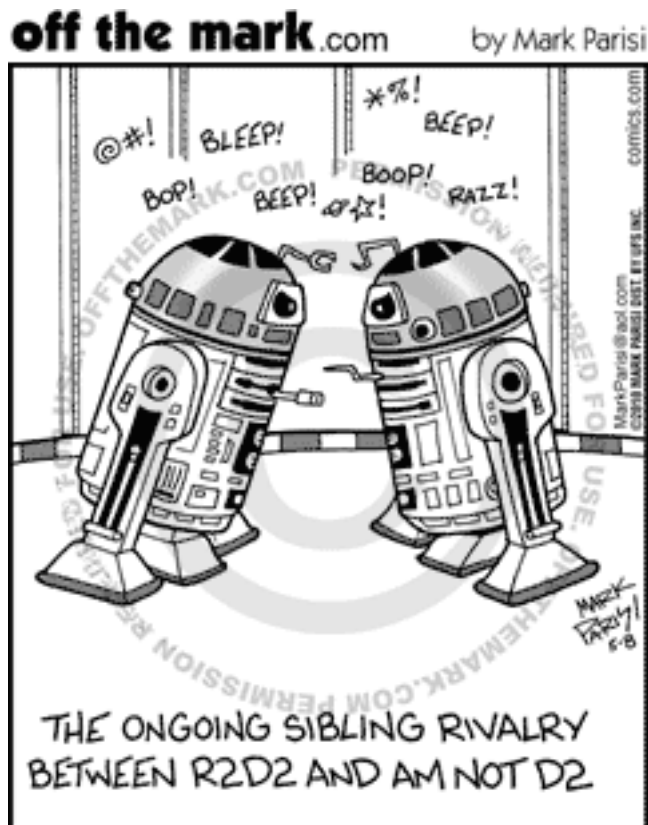
Conflict is a form of energy and life. It's evidence that more than one thought, feeling, and approach exists. Without conflict, we would stagnate and wither. Conflict lets us know we're alive and that we have a point of view in the world. Conflict, in and of itself, is not a problem.

As parents, we want to raise kids who are able to manage their relationships and friendships. Strange as it sounds, a conflict-free home is NOT a peaceful home. A conflict-free home would be an emotionally shut-down space with underlying tension. If you've ever been in a home that doesn't allow conflict, you know it's like walking on eggshells.

Peaceful homes are vibrant and full of energy, with room for emotion and disagreement. Peaceful homes are safe spaces to disagree.

And how we handle conflict is the way our children learn to handle conflict.

One of the biggest advantages to having a sibling is the opportunity to get lots of practice negotiating conflict, resolution, repair, and forgiveness.



### **Research says:**

According to the University of Michigan, there are some potential causes (apart from trying to irritate parents):

- Each child is competing to define who they are as an individual. As they discover who they are, they try to find their own talents, activities, and interests. They want to show that they are separate from their siblings.
- Children feel they are getting unequal amounts of your attention, discipline, and responsiveness (this may be just what they perceive not what is actually occurring).
- Children may feel their relationship with their parents is threatened by the arrival of a new baby.
- Your children's developmental stages will affect how mature they are and how well they can share your attention and get along with one another.
- Children who are hungry, bored or tired are more likely to become frustrated and start fights (don't we all?).
- Children may not know positive ways to get attention from or start playful activities with a brother or sister, so they pick fights instead.
- Children often fight more in families where parents think aggression and fighting between siblings is normal and an acceptable way to resolve conflicts.
- Not having time to share regular, enjoyable family time together (like family meals) can increase the chances of children engaging in conflict (there is actually a campaign in QLD to encourage families to eat together at the table – a bit like we used to do in the olden days).
- Stress in the parents' lives can decrease the amount of time and attention parents can give the children and increase sibling rivalry (my thoughts on this are that attention should be about quality rather than quantity).
- Stress in your children's lives can shorten their fuses, and decrease their ability to tolerate frustration, leading to more conflict (are they coping at school; is something worrying them?).
- How parents treat their kids and react to conflict can make a big difference in how well siblings get along.

Remember conflict in a family is normal. We sometimes have expectations that our own families will be different and perfect. This is never the case...

### **What can we do as parents?**

#### **Accept it when it arrives (and it will arrive!)**

It is liberating to realise that conflict is simply part of the human condition. Avoiding conflict may actually sow the seeds for passive aggressive behaviour.

#### **When a conflict is erupting or already in full bloom, ask yourself:**

- What is the conflict about on the surface?
- What is *beneath* the surface?
- What triggered the conflict?
- What does everyone involved truly want?

This requires us to get involved, which flies in the face of traditional approach that says you're supposed to "let the kids work it out themselves."

There's a fairly predictable pattern when we leave kids to their own devices:

1. They use the limited tools they have in their toolkit, which usually boils down to either physical force or verbal manipulation.
2. Then we get mad at their solution, and we step in to punish them as a way of controlling their behaviour.
3. Everyone ends up crying, frustrated, and we likely send everyone to separate corners.

This old-school system doesn't work most of the time.

Instead we could try to mindfully guide our children through conflict. Phrases such as, "Whoa, I hear a lot of yelling," or "Everybody freeze a second," can help stop conflict from escalating further.

Insist that everyone remain calm while resolving the conflict (easier said than done especially when it's me trying to remain calm!).

Once things calm down, we can ask curious questions without judgment. For example, "*Can you tell me (one at a time) what was going on?*"

Once you have heard everyone you can continue with, "*OK, let's back up to where we think it really began,*" can help get to the root of the conflict with everyone feeling heard.

This allows each child to tell you their side of the story and feel like you are really hearing how right they are. Ask them to take turns in speaking to avoid them shouting over each other and the argument once again escalating

The bottom line is we must get involved so we can teach and guide our kids. Yes, it takes longer in the short-term – but in the end, it takes a lot less time and involvement on our part.

The long-term outcome of helping your kids resolve their conflicts now is that you'll get children *who can resolve conflicts their whole lives*.

Shifting your mindset and learning a new way to help siblings negotiate conflict will do a lot to change the trajectory at home and help you raise loving siblings for life.

**Encourage positive communication** make suggestions and let kids decide what to do with them. Discourage dobbing. Look for the good by saying things such as 'that's kind of you to let your brother go first' this will help to build their relationship in a positive way.

Focus on each child's individual needs. Some sibling rivalry may result from your child's perception that you love another child more than him - make sure that you show your love equally and in meaningful ways (even if their behaviour isn't what you hope it might be).



### **Is there any good news?? Apparently...**

According to the Raising Children Network:

- These kinds of disagreement are part of growing up in a family. In fact, they can be a great chance for your children to practise the social skills they'll need as adults. **Fighting will decrease** as your children grow and develop better social skills.
- When disagreements between brothers and sisters get worked out fairly and without anyone getting hurt, children start to build problem-solving skills such as negotiating. They also learn the importance of seeing another person's point of view and respecting other people's rights, feelings and belongings.
- **One of the keys to fewer fights is what you do when kids aren't fighting.** This includes showing them how to use good social and emotional skills such as managing angry feelings, reminding them about the importance of negotiating and helping them learn to play fair. An opportunity to role play good behaviour!

There is more information about what kids fight about at different ages and how their temperament and environment can impact on their relationship with their sibling. There is also a little video with some mums (including Johanna Griggs) talking about the strategies they use.

Also take a look at Parent TV for extra ideas and resources.

<http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/fighting.html>

<https://parenttv.com>

**Remember – sibling rivalry and conflict happens in all families and it is a normal part of growing up. As always if you have any questions or would like any further information please don't hesitate to contact me.**

### 2-Minute Action Plan for Fine Parents

#### **Drop the Fairytale Fantasy**

Tell yourself that it's normal for siblings to fight. Remember, conflict is an opportunity for them to grow and learn how to negotiate tension with someone they love.

#### **Listen Up**

Give each child a chance to tell their side of the story, while the other child listens. If this doesn't work or your kids are too young to sit through this exercise, then separate them to be sure each child feels totally heard by you before you take action.

## Ongoing Action Plan for Fine Parents

### Replace "Fair" with "Kind"

To kids, fair means "even-stein." Instead, use "kind." Asking kids to think with kindness leads to much more creative solutions than figuring what's merely fair on the surface.

### Tune-In to The Fights

Listen to your kids' arguments. See if any patterns emerge, and if you can show your kids they are stuck in a pattern.

### Re-think Your Overall Strategy

Rather than trying to raise your kids as siblings, try a new strategy of raising them as if they were friends. This can help re-frame how they interact, play, and argue.

<https://afineparent.com/positive-parenting-faq/sibling-fights.html#more-14824>

