

Solutions for Sibling Rivalry

It drives us crazy when our kids fight. What parent doesn't want their children to get along and demonstrate good social skills? But what discipline methods are we suppose to use when arguing, hitting, and fighting break out? As children, we remember what our parents usually did to us when we fought. Most of their disciplinary actions were either counterproductive, unfair, or considered harmful today. Our dilemma is that we know what we DON'T want to do, but we're not really sure what TO do.

Many parents react by first using the timeout technique. The child instigates an argument or fight and the parent sends him to his room, removing the child from the area to think about what he did to cause the problem. Some methodologies even prescribe a time frame for children to be in timeout based on their age. But using timeout rarely achieves the intended goal and simply becomes another ineffective form of punishment. It might stop a behavior temporarily, but it also creates new problems such as undue attention, suppressed anger, and a break down in self-esteem.

The original timeout tool was designed by experts to calmly remove an out-of-control child who is likely to hurt himself or another. The caregiver then soothes the child and allows him to return when he has calmed down completely. The timeout place and the entire process is something that the caregiver should design and practice with the child well in advance so that the child is prepared to experience it and able to adapt. The intention of this form of timeout was that the child will eventually learn to go to a predetermined, special place to calm himself when he senses that the difficult emotions have returned.

Siblings and playmates hit and fight for many reasons and much of it revolves around testing, frustration, imitation, and learning to form relationships. A toddler bites because she hasn't yet developed adequate social skills; a preschooler is unable to express himself in words when he becomes easily frustrated during play; and a school age child strikes another child to test the boundaries or imitate behavior she has seen before.

Putting together a good cake requires a recipe of many ingredients and a multitude of baking actions. Solving behavioral situations with discipline also requires a recipe and cannot be solved with one thing. Here are some suggestions for dealing with hitting and fighting:

- Acknowledge each of the children whenever you catch them getting along. They both need to know what positive behavior looks like. Make a big deal out of it when you see it and thank them for getting along.
- Limit television shows or videos that depict inappropriate behavior or poor relationships. Channels such as ABC Family or Nickelodeon masquerade as a children's or family network, yet much of the content sets inappropriate examples.
- Find a time when the children are in good spirits, bring them together, get to their eye level, and explain that hitting is not okay in your family or classroom. Tell them, "Sometimes when people get mad, they need to be alone for a while to calm down." Tell them that from now on, whenever you sense that a fight is likely to occur, you will be separating them to different rooms to play alone for a while. They can also

determine on their own when they are ready to come back together to play. Avoid doing this every time you hear an argument and limit it to only when you've absolutely heard enough or when someone's safety is at risk.

- Look for opportunities to teach your children how to express emotion appropriately. Whenever they look like they are frustrated or angry with you, get to their eye level and acknowledge their emotion by saying, "You look like you are really mad at mommy. It's OK to feel mad." Don't say anything more. Don't try to make everything all better or defend yourself when you have laid down a rule or boundary that caused the frustration. You want them to learn that emotions associated with being frustrated are normal and healthy, but controlling our actions is most important.
- When they look like they are angry or frustrated with someone else, do the above plus help them verbalize their feeling by coaching them by saying things like, "It looks like you're mad at your brother because he took your toy. Tell him how it makes you feel when he takes your toy."
- If the fights tend to be over toys that they share, teach the children about the use of a visual timer for taking turns. You should control the timer and set it when they ask.
- Time out as punishment is not okay, but separating them with love and kindness is. If it sounds and looks like things are heating up (not just bantering or bickering) and you've discussed this with them in the past, simply tell them "It looks like the two of you need some alone time" and guide them to separate environments to play or cool down. Use a soft and loving tone of voice and don't say anything more than that. You want to model words and actions that you want them to learn.
- Whenever a tussle begins to erupt, always enter the commotion peacefully, without words, and without emotion. This sets an example of being peaceful and calm and avoids adding to the negative energy. If you're able, love each child at the same time by gently rubbing their backs. This says, "I love you both equally." If they are fighting over an object, ask for the object (don't just take it) by putting your hand out and waiting patiently (without speaking). When they give it to you, thank them for stopping the fight and giving you the object. Tell them that you will return it when they can work together and determine how they will share the object.
- Running in every time there is a tussle or disagreement is also not a good thing to do. It teaches the children that you are responsible for controlling them and they will expect you to do it every time. They may get the message, "I can do whatever I want until mommy controls me." It could even motivate them to do it more often because they will use it to get you involved and engaged whenever they want to feel connected to you, especially if you have been a busy parent.
- It can be difficult watching one child continuously losing his space and being attacked, but it is best to avoid over-protecting one child over another. This could weaken that one child and anger the other. However, if a younger child begins hitting an older sibling, as I stated above, hitting is not okay. The child being hit should be attended to first and allow the hitting child to help you sooth the victim. If this doesn't stop the unwanted behavior, find a way to separate them for a while to play individually. It may not seem fair to the child who did not appear to start the problem, but you can't be sure. No one ever guaranteed that life has to be fair, so avoid making everything fair with your children.

Finally, keep in mind that children don't necessarily see their siblings as loving family members like you do. Instead, they sometimes see them as competition to fight with over toys, space, food, and even mom and dad. They may actually believe that they better get their share of these resources before the other child does. Your role as the parent or teacher is to stay engaged, monitor, set good examples, coach, and not add to the emotion or struggles. You should not make yourself policeman, judge, and jury for every little scuffle. This reaction on your part only reinforces the negative behavior you're trying to stop.

Bill Corbett is the author of the book "Love, Limits, & Lessons: A Parent's Guide to Raising Cooperative Kids" in English and in Spanish, and the founder and president of Cooperative Kids. He has three grown children, two grandchildren, and lives with his wife Elizabeth near Hartford, Connecticut. You can visit his Web site www.CooperativeKids.com for further information and parenting advice.