

LADC Behavior Handout

Sibling Rivalry



Learn Your Role in Preventing and Reducing Conflict

Dr. Jenna Edlund

Sibling rivalry is inevitable if there is more than one child in the house. In 2012, a research study found sibling conflict can occur at a rate of up to 8 times per hour. This research also identified that over 70% of families reported physical aggression between siblings.

Sometimes when parents hear their children fighting, they feel a variety of emotions, such as: anger, helplessness, exasperated, disappointed, frustrated, embarrassed, overwhelmed, or agitated. Parents might worry if the sibling rivalry is normal or if this is evident of future problem behaviors to come with friends at school.

Forms of Sibling Rivalry:

- Name calling
- Blaming others for their mistakes
- Tattling
- Poking
- Taking toys
- Arguing
- Looking at each other in a mean way
- Breaking items the other created
- Hitting
- Throwing things at each other
- Making annoying noises to bother each other

Functions of Sibling Rivalry

All behavior has a function. Sibling rivalry may be maintained by one function or might have various functions depending on the situation. Here are some functions of Sibling Rivalry:

- Get attention from sibling
- Get attention from parent
- Feel powerful
- Due to boredom
- Wanting physical contact
- Wanting access to tangible items sibling has

All of these are appropriate needs for a child, as a parent, you can help them to identify other ways to fulfill these needs.

Key useful characteristics to remember:

- Sibling rivalry is inevitable (doesn't mean something is wrong or that you aren't a good parent),
- Children gain benefits from fighting (find out what that benefit is and find alternative ways to teach them to access that)
- Let go of the idea that you can eliminate sibling rivalry (rather use it as an opportunity for your children to learn)
- Build awareness of how you may be using ineffective approaches to handle the sibling rivalry based on how you were parented.

Sibling rivalry changes as children develop. The most challenging years for sibling rivalry are in the early childhood stage. There are frequent fights and parents must intervene often. Remember, this will decrease as your children get older, develop more self-control, develop problem solving skills, and learn independent play.

Sibling conflict doesn't have to be viewed as all bad. Sibling conflict creates opportunities for children to manage conflict and utilize problem solving strategies. It also helps children learn to be assertive to stand up for themselves. Finally, sibling conflict can help children learn to be flexible, negotiate, and compromise.

Preventative Strategies for Sibling Rivalry

Establish Family Rules

During a time when things are calm, establish some family rules and teach them to your children. The rules can be around physical aggression, verbal aggression, and destruction of property. You want to clearly send the message that they don't have to be friends with their siblings (or like them) but they do have to treat them safely/kindly. It can also be helpful to let your children know what consequences will happen should they break one of the family rules.

Parenting Styles

Parenting styles can affect the amount that siblings may fight. When parents take a very rigid, strict approach to parenting/discipline, children may tend to fight more with their sibling (when they can get away with it) because aggression has been modeled to them. When children grow up in homes where the parenting style is very permissive or nonexistent, children may not be getting enough attention and don't have rules to shape their behavior, so they fight more. It is important to be in between both of those extreme parent styles. It is important to develop boundaries/rules in the family to help provide structure for the children to learn from; however, it is also important to respect individual needs and encourage positive/loving connections in the family by engaging in many activities together.

Quick Ideas to Prevent/Minimize Conflict

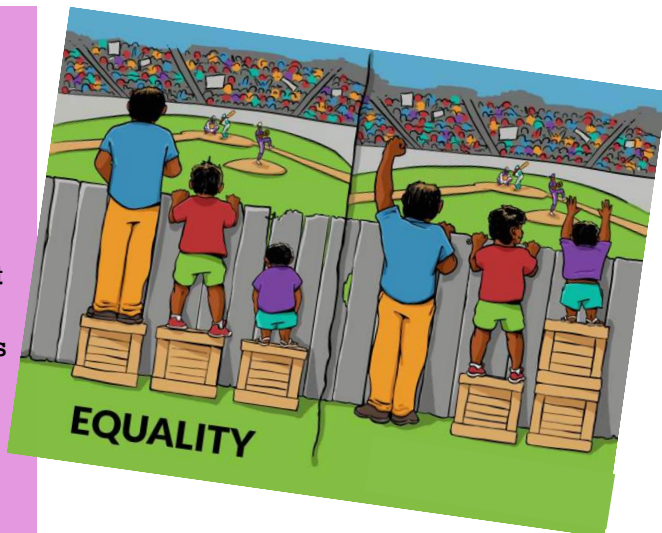
The following are a great overview of strategies to utilize as much as possible. All of these can be done prior to any sibling conflict as preventative strategies. To be most effective, they must be used or taught repeatedly. Some of them will be described in greater detail in the following pages:

- Read books that target sibling compassion
- Avoid comparing your children
- Give your time in terms of need rather equality
- Teach children how to be assertive and communicate effectively with their words
- Be a positive role model for prosocial interactions and effective communication
- Be an observer
- Teach problem solving skills
- Identify and initiate activities that your children CAN and ENJOY doing together
- Create separate spaces in the house where children can go to be alone.

Equality Versus Fairness

Help teach your children that you make your decisions based on need rather than fairness. You can help explain that fair does not mean equal, but rather giving each child what they need. Every child is different and has different needs to grow and develop. By changing their mindset on how to focus meeting their children's needs (rather than keeping things equal), often parents will find that the pressure on themselves drops. This mentality also helps children to become more aware of those around them and the needs they may have.

To explain this concept, you can use the analogy of the Band-Aid. If fair meant equal then if one child got a scrape and needed a Band-Aid, everyone would get a Band-Aid. If one child wanted a drink of water, then everyone would need to drink water at that time.



Child-Friendly Books about Siblings

- I Want to Be the Only Dog by Julia Cook
- What Should Danny Do? by Ganit and Adir Levy
- What Should Darla Do? by Ganit and Adir Levy
- Maple and Willow Together by Lori Nichols
- Our Amazing Blankets by Kealy Connor Lonning
- I Used to Be Famous by Becky Cattie, Tara Luebbe, and Joanne Lew-Vriethoff
- Owl Babies by Martin Waddell and Patrick Benson
- The Evil Princess vs. The Brave Knight by Jennifer Holm
- The Unbudgeable Curmudgeon by Matthew Burgess
- Dollop and Mrs. Fabulous by Jennifer Sattler
- Mia Moves Out by Miranda Paul
- Philomena's New Glasses by Brenna Maloney
- Big Red Lollipop by Rukhsana Khan
- The Bad Birthday Idea by Madelin Valentine
- When Miles Got Mad by Samatha Kurtzman-Counter and Abbie Schiller
- Pigs and a Blanket by James Burks

Remember, many of these books can be found on YouTube by typing the title and "read aloud" next to it so you don't have to purchase hard copies!

Books for Parents

- Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together SO You Can Live Too by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life by Laura Markham
- 101 Activities for Siblings Who Squabble by Linda Abers

Activities Together

Below and in some of the graphics you can find some activities that your children can do together that build a positive relationship. If it is too hard for them to engage in an activity together right now without fighting, you could focus on the individual quiet activities that they could each do separately but in the same room to work on tolerance of their presence.

- Funny animal walks with siblings – they take turns who gets to call out the animal.
- Funny face freeze
- Older sibling can read to the younger sibling – even if they can't read, they can "tell" the story.
- Dancing as it is great for various ages and gives autonomy while having fun
- Water play
- Messy art

Below are activities that promote cooperation and movement. Movement can help prevent escalated emotions.

40 SIMPLE ACTIVE SIBLING PLAY IDEAS

1. Jumping Jacks
2. Jumping on a mini trampoline or large outdoor trampoline 
3. Heavy work activities
4. Crawling through tunnels or under objects
5. Wall or chair Pushes
6. Animal Crawls (can you crawl like a bear? crab? frogs? seals?)
7. Ball Pass (Stand back to back and pass a ball by turning to the side in one direction, than reverse)
8. Ball Pits (make your own by filling up a small swimming pool with balls)
9. Reading in a bean bag chair 
10. Biking
11. Climbing trees or on a jungle gym
12. Use fidget toys (such as the Wacky Tracks Hand Fidget, Wood Fidget Puzzle, DoGo Putty, Tangle Therapy Hand Fidget)
13. Chewing toys or tools such as Chewable Jewelry (suggested Chewable Jewelry Options here OR Chewable Desk Buddy) 
14. Crashing mat
15. Play with a parachute
16. Popcorn jumps (jumping from a squat position and then landing back in a squat position)
17. Wheelbarrow walking
18. Obstacle course
19. Passing weighted balls back and forth 
20. Scooter board activities
21. Resistance bands
22. Bouncing on a therapy or exercise ball
23. Listening to upbeat OR calming music
24. Swinging
25. Going outside for a walk or hike 
26. Skipping
27. Running
28. Bean bag squeezes
29. Drinking water through a water bottle with a Bite Valve 
30. Chewing gum (all natural chewing gum option)
31. Using a weighted blanket or vest
32. Lifting light weights
33. Yoga moves
34. Swimming
35. Tummy Time
36. Headphones to block out unnecessary noise
37. Roller blade or skating
38. Visit the playground
39. Climb stairs
40. Tight hugs

CALM the CHAOS

Special Time

Begin a structured time of 10 minutes daily where your children spend time together. This can be extra helpful if there is a large age gap between your children or one is less interested in playing with the other one. This is a way to maintain a connection but keep it short enough to stay successful!

Bedtime Routine

Begin a new routine at bedtime where your children have a chance to say a positive comment like "goodnight" or "I love you".

Take Pictures

Take pictures of your children engaging in sweet moments together to help them to recognize the importance of small kind moments.

Building Positive Memories

Research by John Gottman has shown that individuals need 5-7 positive interactions to counterbalance one single negative interaction. Instead of stressing over how many positive interactions they are having and if it is enough to fit in that ratio, rather make it a goal to just create many opportunities for those positive interactions. That could be through activities, a warm greeting, or even a smile. Below you will find more ways to teach positive interaction skills and foster opportunities for them.

Teaching Phrases Siblings Can Say to Each Other

Children need to be taught various ways that they can communicate kindly with their sibling when engaging with them. Practice, repetition, and modeling will help your children to utilize these skills with their siblings.

25 FUN AND KIND SIBLING GREETINGS

1. "You're awesome!"
2. "You're so fun to play with."
3. "Today's going to be a great day! I can feel it!"
4. "You've got this!"
5. "I love you."
6. "Never give up!"
7. "You're gonna rock it."
8. "I'm excited to see you tackle your day!"
9. "You can handle it."
10. "I believe in you."
11. "You make me happy."
12. "Have fun."
13. "Can I give you a hug?"
14. "You're so athletic."
15. "I really like your smile."
16. "You have the best ideas!"
17. "Have a great day... but if you don't... that's okay too!"
18. "See you later, alligator."
19. "You are strong."
20. "Have a rock n' roll day!"
21. "Be yourself."
22. "I'm so lucky to have you as a brother/sister."
23. "You're so smart."
24. "You're always so creative."
25. "Enjoy your day."

CALM the CHAOS

Teaching Effective Communication

Another way to set your child up for success is to teach them effective ways of communicating with their sibling when problems arise, such as alternative ways to saying they are frustrated or asking for what they need.

HOW TO TALK SO SIBLINGS WILL LISTEN

INSTEAD OF...

STOP! DON'T

GO AWAY!

DON'T TOUCH MY STUFF!

GIVE ME THAT!

I WON, HA HA HA!

TRY SAYING...

I DON'T LIKE IT WHEN YOU...
WHEN YOU DO "X" IT MAKES ME FEEL...
CAN YOU PLEASE NOT ...?

WHEN CAN WE MAKE A PLAN TO PLAY?
WILL YOU GIVE ME SPACE?
I WILL PLAY WITH YOU LATER.

I AM WORRIED ABOUT...
I AM AFRAID YOU WILL...

WILL YOU SHOW ME HOW TO...
I WAS USING THAT, YOU CAN USE IT WHEN...

GOOD GAME. CAN WE PLAY AGAIN?
THAT WAS FUN.
I LIKE THAT GAME.

CALM the CHAOS

HOW TO TALK SO SIBLINGS WILL LISTEN

INSTEAD OF...

YOU'RE MEAN, YOU'RE STUPID!

IT'S NOT FAIR!

THEY ALWAYS / NEVER...!

YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME!

MOMMMM!!!!

TRY SAYING...

I DON'T LIKE WHAT YOU DID.
IT UPSET ME WHEN...
IT HURTS MY FEELINGS WHEN...
I'M UPSET BECAUSE...

I FEEL LIKE (SIBLING) GETS MORE/LESS...
CAN I HAVE MORE/LESS (ITEM) LIKE (SIBLING)?

WHEN WILL IT BE MY TURN?
I'D LIKE TO DO THIS WHEN YOU ARE DONE.
THIS MAKES ME FEEL...

I WANT TO HELP MAKE A DECISION.
LET'S TAKE TURNS MAKING THE RULES.
I THINK WE SHOULD BOTH HAVE A SAY.

LET'S FIGURE THIS OUT BY OURSELVES.
WHAT WOULD MOM SAY IF WE ASKED HER?
I DON'T KNOW HOW TO FIX THIS, LET'S GET MOM TO HELP.

CALM the CHAOS

Problem Solving Strategies

Another critical thing to work on with your children is to teach problem solving skills. You can help them work through the problem together by teaching them the steps of conflict resolution.

- At first, you will have to walk young children through the process, and it may take some time; however, learning these skills will help them to navigate relationships with their siblings and peers.
- It is best to pre-teach the different solutions to problems when they are both calm, prior to the conflict!
- When helping them in the moment, make sure to get down on their level. Make sure to remove the toy or item that they were fighting about so that they can focus on the resolution. Then help each child to express what they feel the problem is and generate a variety of possible solutions that could work for each of them. Help choose one and try out the solution. You can use the visual cards below to provide them with some ideas of solutions to the problems. Your children may need to take a calm down break before they are able to engage in conflict resolution.

Problem Solving Visuals

WAIT PATIENTLY FOR A TURN



SET A TIMER



ASK NICELY FOR A TURN



SAY "PLEASE STOP"



WALK AWAY




PLAY TOGETHER



ASK TO PLAY WITH THEM



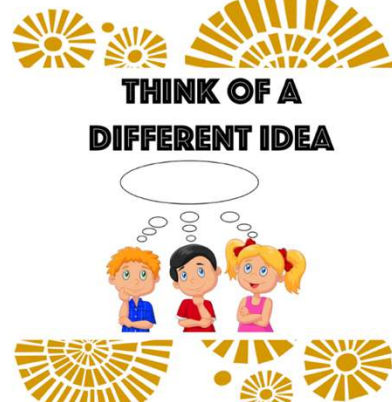

SAY "MAYBE NEXT TIME"



PLAY ALONE IN A NEW AREA





THINK OF A DIFFERENT IDEA



Print and cut out the cards to use with your children! You can also make your own using pictures of your kids.

TRADE WITH THEM



Tootling: Opposite of Tattling

Tattling vs. Telling

Teach the difference between tattling and telling. You can help your children learn that they cannot “tattle” to get someone in trouble, but they can “tell” to get someone out of trouble. For example, a child telling their parent that their sister is coloring on the wall is tattling but the child reporting to their parent that their sister is putting that crayon in their mouth and could choke, is telling.

Tootling

Tootling is an intervention that allows children to receive attention from their parents, by reporting positive things that their siblings are doing. This inadvertently is also reinforcing their siblings for doing prosocial behaviors such as inviting a sibling to play with them, sharing with a sibling, saying something kind to the sibling, helping the sibling, or being gentle with their sibling.

Ways to Increase Tootles

If your children are struggling to grasp the concept of tootling or just aren't motivated to find things to tootle, there are a couple of ways you can help:

1. You can point out opportunities for tootles. You could say to one of your children, “Maggie, did you notice what kind thing Max just did for you? That could be a tootle!” Then help Maggie to say thank you to Max.
2. Another opportunity to prompt for tootles is in the moment when one of your children comes to you with a tattle. You can remind them that you are wanting to hear tootles and they can go back and see if they can find something kind that one of their siblings is doing.
3. The last way is in the moment you could prompt one of your children who has a hard time sharing by saying “Max, if you give Maggie a turn with that toy right now, that would be a great way to earn another tootle for the jar!”

The term *tootling* came from a combination of two core components of the intervention. One aspect came from the phrase “tooting your own horn” (i.e., saying something nice about yourself); however, instead of tooting their horn, children toot the horn of their siblings (i.e., say something nice about their brother or sister). The second aspect from which the term *tootling* came from the opposite behavior of tattling. When a child tattles, they report the inappropriate or negative behavior that another sibling has done; therefore, tootling is the opposite of tattling because your children report the prosocial or positive behavior a sibling is doing.

How to Reinforce Tootling

In order to increase your children's use of giving tootles, instead of tattles, there needs to be a reward system. The best way to get your children to work together as a team is to create a group reward. Each time that one of the children gives a tootle about something kind a sibling did or even if you see the siblings doing kind things for each other, you can give a tootle. Every tootle, they get to put a pom poms in the joint family jar. Once they reach a certain number of pom poms, the family gets a surprise reward.

Benefits of Tootling

1. Removes parental attention for tattling (which will then possibly decrease tattling behavior)
2. Your children will shift their focus towards the positive things their siblings are doing (rather than the negative).
3. By having others notice more of their positive interactions, your children will want to engage in more prosocial behaviors. (Remember, “Where Attention Goes, Behavior Grows”)
4. You are teaching your children how to give compliments or have good manners after someone is kind to them.
5. It shifts the dynamic of the household to focusing on the positives, creating a more positive household.

How to Respond Once Conflict as Already Happened

How to know when to intervene in sibling rivalry? You can utilize the “green light to red light” guideline from The Center for Parenting Education to determine what your children are needing from you, which will then influence your next action.



- **Green light**

Normal Bickering, minor name calling

Parent's role – Stay out of it.

- **Yellow light**

Borderline, volume is going up, nasty name-calling, mild physical contact, threats of danger

Parent's role – Acknowledge anger and reflect each child's viewpoint.

- **Orange light**

Potential Danger, more serious, half play/half real fighting

Parent's role – Inquire: “Is it play or real?” Firmly stop the interaction, review rules, and help with conflict resolution.

- **Red light**

Dangerous Situation, physical or emotional harm is about to or has occurred

Parent's role– Firmly stop the children and separate them. If a child is hurt, attend to that child first, review the rules, and possibly impose a consequence.

Alternative Interventions

Play Stations

On really hard days, when your children need time apart, you can set up various play stations around the house. The kitchen table could have Play-Doh, the family room could have blankets and books, the bedroom could have a building toy like Legos, and the basement could have an electronic device. You can set a timer for 20 minutes and have your children rotate around the stations for individual time.

The Share Room

Another idea is to rename the playroom, the “share room”. When your children are having troubles playing nicely together, you can remind them that it is the share room. If children are not in the mood to share or just need some space, they can go and play elsewhere. Having this choice helps to teach your children that they can take the toys that are their toys to an alternative location; however, sometimes having a playmate is more fun than having all toys by yourself. Also, they can't take toys that are family toys out of the room.

Ignoring

- When you are ignoring, make sure that you are not providing attention through your facial expressions or even comments. Sometimes parental attention (even negative attention) could be maintaining some of the sibling arguments.

Describing/ Reflecting

- When you are intervening on the yellow light problems, start by describing what you see happening and reflect each child's view of the problem.