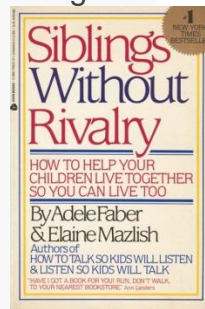


“Mom, he touched me”; “Dad, she hit me”; “Mom, that’s not fair!”

Sibling rivalry: "competition between siblings for the love, affection, and attention of one or both parents or for other recognition or gain". Sounds familiar? It's part of life for most families with more than one child; a part that parents do not enjoy, but usually suffer through. Of course, conflict with the people we live with, eat with and share bathrooms with, is inevitable, and a good learning ground for future relationships. So, 100% peace and quiet is not something to strive for in a family. But when sibling fighting is wearing a parent down, and causing great stress, it may be time to try something new. I offer this blog post to those of you who are overwhelmed, and to those of you who just want to reduce the squabbling. As my mom used to say to me and my sister, "can't I have a moment of peace?!!"

My all time favorite resource on this topic is the book, *Siblings Without Rivalry*, by Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish. . The authors offer hope, based on their years of experience, "that we, as parents, can make a difference. We can either intensify the competition or reduce it. We can drive hostile feelings underground or allow them to be vented safely. We can accelerate the fighting or make cooperation possible. As parents, our attitudes and words have power." It was published over 20 years ago, with slightly updated editions, but remains a valuable guide.



Here are a few basic tips for reducing sibling rivalry, to get you started. If sibling rivalry is a major issue in your family, I suggest reading the book.

- **Ask yourself these questions:** What do you normally do in reaction? What do you do that seems to help? What do you do that seems to make it worse? If you had siblings, do you recall what your parents did that increased or decreased hostility? Take some time with these questions.
- **This is a tough one: Intervene as little as possible:** remove yourself from the situation ("I'm going to go out to garden while you work this out." OR remove them "If you are going to argue, please do it downstairs and shut the door.")
- When a child comes to you with complaints about a sibling, **acknowledge their feelings and validate them, even the negative ones.** Faber & Mazlish: Children need to be able to air their feelings and wishes about their siblings. even the unsavory ones. Examples: "You don't like my spending so much time with the baby." "You feel your brother does things just to irritate you." According to Faber and Mazlish, in their studies of sibling rivalry, "insisting upon good feelings

between the children led to bad feelings. Acknowledging bad feelings between the children led to good feelings."

- **Express what the child might wish;** "Sometimes you wish she'd go away." "You wish she would ask you before borrowing your stuff." "You wish grandmom spent more time with you"
- **Encourage age appropriate alternatives to fighting** to express feelings: "No hurting your sister. Do you want to draw me a picture of how you feel?" No punching, tell your sister how angry you are using words." "you sound furious! But I expect you to confront your brother without name calling."
- **Role model:** If you want to ask kids to find alternatives to yelling and hitting, you need to do this as well. The book describes one dad saying to his family, "You know we are all hurting each other too much with this name calling. We're going to try to stop that. Cold turkey"; when he hears name calling between the brothers, he follows up with, "Hey, one thing we agreed to, no more name calling, I'm not doing it and you're not. Tell your brother what is bothering you."
- **Stop worrying too much about them being friends.** As Adele Faber recalls, "one of the happiest days of my life was the day I gave up the "good friends" dream and replaced it with a more realistic goal. Instead of worrying about my boys becoming friends, I began to think about how to equip them with the attitudes and skills they'd need for all their caring relationships."
- **Avoid comparisons.** It just intensifies rivalry and can cause long term emotional pain. Say what you want to say to your child, without reference to his brother or sister. It's not a contest.
- **Don't worry about treating each child equally, treat them uniquely.** Give in terms of need and explain it that way. "Johnny needs a new coat because he grew out of his old one."
- **Avoid locking children into roles,** "the smart one, the mean one, the lazy one." Faber & Mazlish: "Life demands many roles. Why limit our children? Why not encourage all of them to take chances, explore their potential?"
- When one child is the aggressor and hurts the other, **pay attention to the injured child.** "Come on, let's put some ice on that." **Avoid assigning bully/victim roles and affirm positive qualities.** Faber and Mazlish: "Children are born with certain personality traits. As parents we have the power to influence those traits, to give nature a helping hand. Let's use our power wisely. Let's not place our children in roles that will defeat them." Example "no hitting, Joey you know how to get what you want without using physical force."
- When fights develop, acknowledge the children's anger toward each other, listen respectfully to both sides and express appreciation of the difficulty of the problem ("That's a tough one - both of you want to ride the swing at the same time").

Express faith in their ability to work out a fair solution and then leave the room. If you try to resolve the conflict one child will be deemed the winner and the other the loser, and they won't learn to settle their disputes without a fight.

- **If a fight reaches a dangerous level, parents should intervene.** First ask both children if it is a "play fight" or a real fight, and if it is the latter insist that it stop immediately. If the children are about to hurt each other, they must be sent to separate rooms to cool off.

It's not magic, but changing your behavior is often the quickest path to changing the behavior of your children. If you are interested in learning and practicing new parenting skills, including how to manage sibling rivalry, consider the Positive Discipline Parenting class series starting in New Milford on Wednesday May 6th 6:30-8:30 PM. Contact the New Milford Youth Agency for details.