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Grow Together

giving kids the roots to help them sprout



Surviving Sibling Squabbles



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When our first child was 18 months old, my husband and I learned she'd soon have a sibling. I immediately began envisioning our two children united in a closely-knit bond of love and friendship. I was certain they'd be each other's confidant and forever playmate.

As I sit here writing this article (seven years later), our two oldest kids are outside romping through the frigid, winter snow. I periodically glance out the window, for I know that at any moment, one misguided throw of a snowball could end the fun in a sudden fit of tears, screams and possible physical confrontation.

For roughly nine months after our son was born, my husband and I enjoyed the loving relationship between Hannah and her younger brother, Jacob. She was the doting big sister and willingly assisted in changing diapers, finding missing pacifiers and making silly faces. But it was during a hot summer day, when Jacob was 9 months old, that I began to have my doubts about just how much Hannah loved her little brother. Hannah, then three years old, was filling her wading pool with the garden hose. Curious, 9-month-old Jacob tentatively crawled over to the edge to investigate. Without hesitation, Hannah turned the hose on Jacob and sprayed the water full force in his face. Accident? I'm not so sure. History has a way of repeating itself when Hannah and Jacob "play" together.

As their mother, I can't help feeling sad, frustrated, angry and at wit's end when I witness my children arguing, hitting and screaming at each other. My husband and I have since added another daughter to the chaos, and tensions run high on a regular basis. Rarely do all three children play together nicely, and one usually feels left out. Moreover, we've discovered that different combinations of siblings work better and that the same child is often the instigator (or so we think).

I suppose I really shouldn't be surprised by my kids' behavior. After all, my husband recalls tormenting his younger sister during their childhood, and my older sister and I fought more often than not. Likewise, our fights were not usually of the verbal variety, and my poor mother often found herself, quite literally, caught in the middle. Mom, I am truly sorry!

So what's a frazzled parent to do to squelch sibling squabbles? Bette Alkazian, Family Therapist and Parent Coach in Southern California, offers these tips:

Treat sibling squabbles as an opportunity to teach your kids conflict resolution, unconditional love and how to be a team player.

Don't side with one child over the other. Remember, there are two sides to every story, and the child who received the punch might not really be the victim.

Let your kids solve conflicts on their own. However, be prepared to intervene if words escalate into actions.

Refrain from labeling or comparing your children, and don't jump to conclusions.

Laura, mother of four-year-old twins, Carlee and Curtis, and three-year-old Cole, and owner of Petite Fleur Designs, offers this practical advice for when kids begin to argue:

Distract them with an activity. Do an art project or go for a walk.

Implement a warning system. For example, Laura counts backwards from 5 to 1 whenever her kids begin to squabble. "They know that if I reach 1, whatever they are playing with will temporarily get taken away." She adds, "They usually cooperate by 3 or 2."

Have enough to go around. With siblings, especially those who are close in age, making sure there is enough for everyone is important.

Be able to predict their actions. "If I see a tantrum coming on, I make sure to head it off by communicating with them and making them use their words."

As difficult as parenting multiple children might be, I cannot imagine depriving my kids of the unique bond shared between siblings. While not all moments are good moments, my kids have certainly shared a wealth of great moments together. And if the relationship my husband and I currently have with our siblings is any indication, I think Hannah, Jacob and Bridget will grow up to be just fine, too.

What do YOU do to cultivate a positive relationship between your children?