

# Sibling Rivalry Strategies

Friday, July 16, 2010

12:46 PM

## Suggestions from [www.parents.com](http://www.parents.com)

<http://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/development/sibling-issues/sibling-fighting/?page=1>

### Battle Zone: Mom's Lap

**The Face-Off:** Your infant is nursing comfortably in your arms, but your 2-year-old wants to climb up into your lap and snuggle now.

**What's Going On:** Your toddler wants to be a big kid, but he hasn't completely left babyhood behind. "Your newborn is a physical reminder to your older child that he no longer occupies that special baby place," says Yael Sank, a psychotherapist at Soho Parenting, in New York City. "All he knows, at this age, is that now he has to share his mommy's love with someone else."

**Keeping the Peace:** A 2-year-old is too young to understand the concept of having a sibling, so playing the big-brother card is not going to make him feel better about his new situation. Instead, be proactive about his fragile feelings. A simple "Mommy's about to nurse, so let's get you comfy first" will let your child know that he's important too. Have a special DVD or stickers to offer as an activity, or invite him to snuggle up on the couch with you. "Your goal is to preempt your kid's understandable jealousy," says Borden.

But there's no such thing as a fail-safe plan. If your child does freak out just when you're least able to drop everything, it'll help to give words to your toddler's feelings so he knows that you understand his frustration. Simply saying "I know this is really hard for you" will go a long way. Another strategy: "Because 2-year-olds are easily distracted and love to hear about themselves, start telling a story about when he was a baby," suggests Laurie Kramer, PhD, professor of applied family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. And if he wants to be swaddled or to drink from a bottle, go ahead and let him regress a little bit -- it's a phase that won't last long.

### Battle Zone: The Playroom

**The Face-Off:** Your 2-year-old knocked over his 4-year-old sister's carefully built Lego project. Between sobs, she hits her brother and yells, "It's his fault!"

**What's Going On:** There's no question that your toddler knows knocking down his sister's tower is going to get a reaction. "At this age, your child realizes that he has the power to make an impact -- both positive and negative," says Sank. So a little excitement is probably just what he was looking to create -- especially if he felt left out or bored. Four-year-olds know they're supposed to use words instead of hitting. And they probably abide by that rule on a playdate or in preschool, but the family room is a different story altogether. "Home is a comfort zone, and kids naturally fall apart in ways they never would at a friend's house or in school," says Anthony E. Wolf, author of *"Mom, Jason's Breathing on Me!" The Solution to Sibling Bickering*. Add to the mix a brother or sister -- the one person who's always going to be around no matter what -- and you have the perfect storm.

**Keeping the Peace:** Forget about playing judge and jury. "Each child needs to hear your house rules reiterated," says Wolf. Say to your older kid, "I know that you're upset, but we never hit; you have to use words to let us know how you feel." To your toddler, you might say, "If you want to play with your sister, you can't knock down her buildings." Let them both know that if they can't get along you're going to separate them. "That might be the biggest motivator of all -- in the end, they'll probably behave because they want to keep playing together," says Wolf.

### Battle Zone: The Backseat of Your Car

**The Face-Off:** Your 3-year-old tells your 5-year-old he's "a poopyhead," setting off a barrage of name-calling that escalates into a screaming match.

**What's Going On:** Put two little kids in a confined space, add boredom plus your need to concentrate on something other than them, and -- boom -- instant blowup. The cold, hard truth: "If kids don't have something appropriate to do, they'll do something inappropriate," says Dr. Kramer.

**Keeping the Peace:** Even for short rides, have activities ready: Sing along to a favorite CD, and take sticker books, Play-Doh, or a favorite toy. Backseat bickering is usually a sign of boredom, so try playing 20 Questions or "I spy" -- it's a way to get them looking out the window instead of annoying each other (and you). But if a battle erupts that distracts you from driving, pull the car over immediately. "Sometimes, if you stop and tell the kids that you're not moving until the fighting ends, it will shock them into silence," says Sank.

### Battle Zone: The Shared Bedroom

**The Face-Off:** Your 4-year-old played with your 6-year-old's truck without permission. In retaliation, the 6-year-old has beheaded her little sister's beloved doll.

**What's Going On:** Competing for your attention may be the number-one rivalry trigger, but sharing -- arguing over space and possessions -- is at the heart of most sibling conflict. And the closer the quarters, the more fodder there is for fighting.

**Keeping the Peace:** When children share a bedroom, it's important that each gets the opportunity to express himself. That way, they're less likely to take out frustrations on each other. Let each kid pick out his own sheets and put up pictures he likes on the wall over his bed. Make sure each child has a shelf where he can keep any off-limits possessions from his sibling.

Also, ask your kids to work together to create room rules. Some ideas: "You can't take my stuffed animals unless you

ask me for them first," or "This room is for both of us, so we can't slam the door and keep somebody out." As kids learn to share, they'll hone skills such as taking turns, respecting others, and negotiating, says Nancy Samalin, author of *Loving Each One Best: A Caring and Practical Approach to Raising Siblings*. But keep in mind that everyone needs a room of one's own (at least metaphorically). Sometimes siblings simply need time apart from each other. Make sure that you occasionally arrange separate playdates or activities for each. And even when they're home together, make sure they each have space to do their own thing without having to share 50-50. Being proactive about making sure each of your children gets enough one-on-one time with you will go a long way toward ending rivalry. The last thing you want to do is inadvertently foster competition. That means you must resist the urge to compare behavior, abilities, or temperaments -- and always stay on message about how your love for each kid is completely equal.

### **Cool Comebacks: How to Help Kids Work It Out**

Try to let the kids work it out. When they come to you, say...

- Sounds like you're having a problem -- I bet you can figure out a way to find a solution you're both happy with.
- It doesn't matter who started this argument. What matters is, how are you going to end it?
- If you can't play nicely, I'm taking the \_\_\_\_\_ away from both of you.
- Is this a play fight or do I have to separate you?

### **Moms Respond: My Kids Fight About...**

Kids will argue over anything and everything. Here's proof.

My kids once chased each other around the room fighting over an imaginary plate of cookies. When the older one pretended to eat the pretend cookies, the younger one melted down in a 10-minute crying fit.

-- *Andrea R.; Sulphur, Louisiana*

Who gets Daddy's attention causes arguments in our house. My 5-year-old and 2-year-old fight over who sits in Daddy's lap, who rides on Daddy's shoulders, or who Daddy bathes first.

-- *Elizabeth W.; Columbus, Georgia*

My children always want to take a bath together, but they bicker over who gets the deep end of the tub. The water might be a millimeter deeper in the drain end, but it's worth the battle!

-- *Kris C.; Sammamish, Washington*

If my 2-year-old daughter even looks at a toy, her 4-year-old sister will put up a fight and claim she was already playing with it.

-- *Jennifer C.; Apex, North Carolina*

My two oldest girls often battle over who gets what Disney-character plate and cup at mealtimes.

-- *Sabrina B.; Westminster, Maryland*