

# Siblings AT WAR

*What do you do when the kids just won't get along?*  
VICTORIA WELLS looks at the age-old issue of sibling rivalry and how best to deal with it



## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The sibling relationship is a constant presence and when you've got two or more kids they're going to be competing for your attention, objects, space... Conflict is inevitable and, in fact, useful. "Children who have a sibling are in a fortunate position of learning how to negotiate and build relationships and that is quite intense," says psychologist Jackie Riach. "It can serve a purpose of learning how to get along with others."

Sarah\* can trace the beginnings of the sibling rivalry with her younger brother to one of her earliest memories as a toddler, getting out of bed one evening to ask for a drink of water. "I walked into the lounge and saw my parents huddled together over my little brother," she recalls. "Mum was probably feeding him – but I just remember feeling deeply disappointed that they'd put me to bed and got me out of the way so they could focus their attention on him."

Feelings of jealousy and competing for attention and approval from parents are all part of rivalry that can develop between children in families as they jockey for their place in the world. Whether it's a toddler disrupted by the arrival of a new baby, siblings who are close in age, or a couple of older siblings with a younger brother or sister – the questions many parents are left asking themselves, as the arguing echoes through the house, are: is it normal, and what can I do to get some peace?

"It's competing for attention of the parents, or for objects... for space," explains psychologist Jackie Riach of the Triple P Parenting Centre. "It's about the developing relationships, because when you've got two kids they're obviously competing for a bit of airtime, but the other thing is they're learning how to get along socially, to live with someone else, to be in a space with someone else. Of course, that creates tension as they vie for their slice of the pie."

The conflict can be useful, however. "Children who have a sibling are in a fortunate position of learning how to negotiate and build relationships and that is quite intense," says Jackie. "It can serve a purpose of learning how to get along with others. But it varies from home to home – the degree of bickering."

She says while children without siblings also have similar opportunities through preschool, having friends over to play and other social interactions, the sibling relationship is a constant presence. "You're always learning to get along with them."

A toddler dealing with the arrival of a new brother or sister is a common scenario when it comes to sibling rivalry. "When a new baby comes... it is a situation of jealousy," explains Jackie. "The older child has had all the attention and now there's less space for them and they have to come to terms with that."

Mother of two, Juliet, says her son Brady was initially very helpful when his little sister, Eve, first arrived. "It wasn't until Brady was over two and a half, and Eve around six months, that I saw some jealousy coming through. Once she started sitting up he would sometimes push her over, snatch things from her hands, and one time gave her a little bite! Fingers crossed this seems to have passed."

How long and to what degree rivalry and the resulting conflict persist comes down to how parents handle the situation, says Jackie. "Rivalry will often lead to an incidence of fighting and it's really common for kids to fight, but I think parents have to draw their own boundaries about what is acceptable in their homes."

"I don't think physical fighting brings about any positive outcomes for anyone, because what we want to do is teach kids to self-regulate and manage their emotions. Some children are more jealous, some are more aggressive; some are very passive. It's about how parents manage the rivalry and that will influence how it plays out, perhaps into the future."

Sarah and her brother clashed as they grew older, "...normal brother/sister stuff", but she says their roles in the family were defined quite early on. "I was the older one who took responsibility and always did everything right, the goody-good; and Luke\* seemed to get away with more because he was the younger one and he was more rebellious and naughty. These roles were set up and reinforced and it made it hard to break out of them."

When Sarah was 15 and Luke was 13 their mother died, which she says brought them together for a short time, but they each dealt with the loss in their own ways, and grew further apart.

"I think Dad would compare us and I'm not blaming him because we all do our best as parents, but I don't think the comparing helped. Going through school I was always a good student and... Luke went the opposite way. By the time we were in high school he ended up getting expelled and moved onto another school and that's where he really started to be more of his own person."

Living on opposite sides of the world for many years, Sarah and Luke fell out further over family finances and could never seem to find a way to mend their relationship.

"As an adult there can be on-going rivalry between siblings," acknowledges Jackie. "Conflict over the will, or who's going to look after Mum? How do you negotiate those things within the family?"

"Dad would say to us, 'I just wish you two would get along,'" says Sarah. "But we didn't even know where to start! For the most part neither of us had the motivation to either."

It wasn't until Sarah's father died, in 2014, that she and her brother finally reconciled and have since built a relationship. "We talked a lot and we just let everything go. And do you know, since all of that I've had this amazing sense of peace that I've never had before."

Jackie says parents can play a key role in helping prevent rivalry from developing to an unhealthy level. "If a parent does things that foster a sense of competition, and vying for parents' attention and favour one child, then you are going to get more of that rivalrous stuff."

She says some comments can unintentionally set children up against one another. "It can be really subtle things: 'Look how well John has tidied his room, it's a pity you weren't doing as good a job as him!' So that's a put-down. The parent's intention may have been to encourage this child to tidy their room up to the standard of their brother, but what they've done is put this one ahead and inadvertently put that one down and drawn a comparison."

Jackie also cites the example of children creating rivalrous situations when they want parents to state who has done the best job of something. Her advice here is to comment on the positives of each child's efforts and, where appropriate, offer constructive feedback.

"I'm not saying eliminate competition, because kids live in a world where there is competition and sometimes it's about learning to lose and coping with not winning the game. Parents need to look at what they're doing to set up a situation where they model a healthy level of competition, [and] sharing the attention so that each kid does get some."

The division of attention is crucial – although a toddler may struggle to learn to share their parents with a new baby, it can be just as difficult for an older child if there is a big gap between them and a new arrival.

"The longer a child has had the sole attention of the parents, the more used to that they are, and maybe the more of an affront the birth of a new baby can be," says Jackie. "If it's six or seven years apart then that is quite a lot of 'me' time and now there's this rather annoying thing taking it! You can have more of a rational conversation with an older child, but also still remembering things that are important to them. Like if they're eight and they go to ballet and Mum always takes them and then suddenly Mum stops then it's about managing that situation so the child is still getting the attention from the parents."

She warns against letting younger children get away with disrupting their older siblings, simply because of their age. "The older one may have the skills to regulate [their reactions] but it's also about the younger one learning to give them some space and not go into their room or play with their stuff. Have boundaries."

Parents have a crucial role in setting the tone for the family, creating rules and boundaries, deciding what is

acceptable behaviour and communicating that consistently to all the family members. Managing sibling rivalry and any resulting conflict is an important part of that because it affects everyone in the family.

Jackie says part of preventing conflict lies in teaching children the social skills to resolve it. "Like how to say 'sorry' when you bump someone, or how to take someone else's perspective. Teaching those skills builds them up so when those situations happen they're more able to manage it." She says parents should praise and encourage when they see positive behaviours like sharing, negotiating and being considerate, and remember that their own behaviour is key too. "If you're highly competitive then do not be surprised if your children are doing exactly the same thing. Maybe that's okay for that family, but if you don't want to see your children always being rivalrous with one another then we need to reflect on what we're modelling as well."

While intense sibling rivalry can persist into adulthood, it's often diluted in later years by the fact the siblings mature into adults and are no longer living in the confines of the same house. "They're maybe not going to be best mates but they're still family and some siblings are going to be more aligned than others. It doesn't mean you can't get along and it doesn't mean you have to be rivalrous."

Sarah's experience has affected the way she parents her own children – two teenage daughters and a son who is seven. "My girls have seen me upset with my brother and they've heard me say, 'Don't you be like this with each other, you've got to look after each other.' They've seen us resolve things too, and the peace that this has brought me. Their relationship will be the longest one they have – longer than the relationship they have with me and their Dad and it's so important to nurture it."

\* Names changed ✨

**TOP TIP** Where the challenging behaviour is relentless, look into parenting programmes about pro social skills, family rules, structure and how to encourage the behaviour you want to see more of.

## TIPS FROM TRIPLE P PARENTING CENTRE:

*The ways in which you deal with rivalry at home will be dictated by your children's ages and stages.*



### TODDLERS AND BABIES

- Prepare your toddler – talk about babies and what to expect (lots of sleeping, crying etc).
- Make any necessary changes to your toddler's routine well before baby is due.
- Involve your child in care of the baby, where possible.
- Spend some quality one-on-one time with your toddler each day.

- Praise your toddler for being gentle with the baby.
- Sometimes you might need to introduce a consequence. e.g. pushing the baby could call for some quiet time.

### OLDER CHILDREN

- Proactively balance the amount of attention each child gets. It's likely one could already be getting more attention from community as well as family.
- Notice the strengths of all the kids and comment on them positively.
- Don't enter the 'game' when they want to show you their drawings, sandcastles etc and ask whose is 'best' – instead, comment on different points of each one's endeavours where you can.
- Address behaviour like put downs early: "We don't speak to each other like that."