

Sibling Conflict: The Art of Intervening



Spark & Stitch Institute
Ignite Courage and Connection with Kids

Sibling squabbles

Parents everywhere raise kids who just can't seem to get along sometimes. These kids usually end up laughing about it as adults but this doesn't make it any easier on us. A certain amount of bickering, fighting, and arguments are just a normal part of growing up. Siblings seem wired to annoy one another, something that can escalate as they get older. We haven't met a parent yet who has found a way to eliminate all sibling rivalry and arguments from family life.

Sibling conflict is training grounds for life

The good news is that you wouldn't want to live without any sibling conflict! Not only is it unrealistic, but as your kids negotiate getting along they are gaining skills they will use for the rest of their lives. Research has shown that when siblings fight or upset each other they are also learning how to regulate their emotions and respond to the emotions of others.

That's not to say the more your kids rail on each other the better, but you can find comfort knowing that at least they are gaining important social skills! Think of your house as a "safe training ground" for working through conflict, gaining skills that will serve them well outside the home.

The art of intervening

This does not mean that you should let your kids have no holds barred fights or that you should tolerate constant bickering. You can and should play a role in helping your kids work through conflict productively. Step in if your kids can't seem to resolve a conflict on their own, the conflict is escalating, or there is constant conflict over the same issue. Your kids rely on you to help them practice good conflict resolution.

Next steps

This short guide is designed to help you think about when and how far you want to step in and when to step away and let them work it out. Each family system and each of our kids is different, so consider this an "offering" rather than a step-by-step foolproof recipe (do those exist?). You might also want to revisit this guide as your kids grow older, gain skills, and their relationships with each other evolve.

Do you over-respond? Under-respond? Or strike a balance?

Don't worry, this is not a pass/fail test! This is just for you. While each of us has our own unique way of parenting when it sibling conflict, our styles tend to fall into three main categories: Over-respond, under-respond, or balanced.

At first glance, which best describes your response?

Overall,

- A: Without me, my children are constantly bickering and "stuck" in their relationship.
- B: My kids are constantly bickering and "stuck" but that's just how siblings are.
- C: I tend to step in only when bickering escalates or becomes a pattern.

I think that:

- A: My kids don't have the skills to navigate conflict with each other.
- B: I am not sure whether my kids have skills but they seem to figure it out.
- C: My kids' skills to negotiate conflict are growing with practice.

I believe:

- A: Good sibling relationships are free of conflict.
- B: Siblings are cruel and mean to each other and there isn't much we can do but wait it out.
- C: Bickering and arguing is a normal part of sibling relationships, patterns of cruelty are not.

In our family,

- A: Our kids rely on adults to help them resolve conflict.
- B: Our kids know that adults are not going to get in the middle.
- C: Our kids can problem solve on their own and rely on adults to help when things get too big.

I have:

- A: A desire to "fix it" when I hear my kids bickering.
- B: A desire to avoid or stay out of sibling conflict.
- C: A desire to help my kids build independence and skills around conflict.

A = Over-respond, B = Under-respond; C= Balanced

Remember, this isn't a "quiz" and it is just for you. It can be helpful to get a snapshot of your general response to sibling conflict *and* to see if your approach is aligned or in conflict with your parenting partner if you have one. Most kids benefit from a balanced approach where parents do their best to stay out of minor conflicts and step in to coach skills when there is a safety concern or patterns and

Remember: Conflict is an opportunity to practice skills.

The reality is that we can't, nor should we try, to stifle all sibling conflicts. Again, research has shown that as siblings navigate conflict they are practicing critical skills they will use outside the household.

Once we frame sibling conflict as an opportunity to practice skills, we can start looking for them in our kids' interactions and spot opportunities to focus on what matters rather than just fix or avoid conflict. In other words, the kids might be fighting over a toy. What they need to practice is problem solving and turn taking.

The strength of skills needed for conflict resolution like perspective taking, communication, empathy, compromise and self-advocacy depend upon two things: wiring (both how they are wired *and* their developmental stage) and practice. Take a look at these [fact sheets from the American Psychological Association](#), to make sure your expectations of what they are capable of are developmentally appropriate. For example, we wouldn't expect an eighteen month old to understand the concept of sharing like their six year old brother might. It's also important to note that these age-based guidelines are created around neurotypical kids so we might need to adjust our expectations in consultation with a care team for our neurodiverse kids.

Based on the fact sheets above and your experience with your child (check that your expectations are reasonable) circle their strengths. Put check marks next to what they need to practice.

Negotiating	Perspective taking
Sharing	Interpreting the emotions of others
Compromising	Taking turns
Self-advocacy	Understanding social rules and norms
Repairing	Imagining different outcomes
Flexibility	Understanding two emotions at the same time
Waiting	Anticipating consequences
Expressing frustration with words	Understanding justice vs. fairness
Understanding expectations	Empathizing
Complex or "gray area" thinking	Creative problem solving

Red, Yellow, or Green?

The art of intervening means that we need to decide when to let our kids work out conflict on their own by flexing their skills and when to step in to help coach. Laying out some general guidelines for yourself when you are calm, means that you might be better able to recall them when things get heated. We've provided some examples, but go in and decide for yourself where some of your lines might be.



Unsafe behaviors like hitting, punching, kicking etc...
Bullying behaviors where one sibling has power over another and uses it in a consistent way physically, verbally, or emotionally
Escalating behaviors heading towards unsafe interactions



Escalating behaviors with uncertain outcome
Boredom squabbling
Yelling



Reasonable bickering
Loud voices
Emotional debate or heated conversation
Expressing reasonable disappointment or sadness

The Art of Intervening

Once you decide that you do need to step in, the goal is to intervene in a way that builds skills and independent problem solving. We want to try to avoid setting up a dynamic where our kids constantly rely on us to referee their every interaction. If the conflict is low-level, your intervention might be low level as well.

Lower touch

Intervene enough to communicate they aren't entirely on their own, but express confidence that they can work it out. Try this for low-level squabbling:

Reflect what you see:

Avoid adding a lot of your own analysis and instead mirror back to your kids what you see happening. You can try, "It sounds like you are having a hard time agreeing on a show!"

Express confidence in their ability to solve it:

Rather than inserting your own solution, make sure they know that you think they can handle it. "I know that you two will figure this one out together so that you can watch a show."

Get out of the way:

When we stay involved for these low level disagreements, it can be really hard to not intervene, lecture, or prescribe the outcome. This is a good time to get out of the way. You can say, "I'll be in the kitchen and you can let me know what you two figure out." As long as the solution is something both kids agree to, avoid over-ruling their solution with your own.

Choose a low level conflict that your kids get into and write out how a "low touch" response from you might sound like. You can use your own words and ideas with the goal of helping them see the conflict, express confidence that they can handle it, and then letting them do it on their own.

Higher Touch

While the lower touch method works great for bickering and minor squabbles, sometimes our kids need much more hands-on coaching. Sometimes the conflict is already so heated that it is clear that they will find it difficult to problem solve on their own or you try to let them work it out and it quickly escalates. This is a good time to try a higher-touch approach.

Avoid taking sides

This is hard! But we should do our best to approach conflict with some degree of curiosity and an open-mind. You can say "I am not here to decide whose fault this is. I am here to help you find a solution."

Listen to each child's perspective without interruption or "cross talking."

Invite each kid to share their perspective. The only rule is that everyone needs to listen until the child talking is done. Ask questions to clarify if need be. Encourage them to speak only for themselves and to name their feelings.

Summarize the conflict based on what you heard.

Try not to add too much of your own analysis. Instead, summarize what you just heard. You might say, "It sounds like you both want to play Minecraft on the iPad but we only have one iPad. I know it is hard to wait to play and it sounds like you are really angry at each other for grabbing the iPad."

Ask your kids to brainstorm possible solutions.

While it can be tempting to jump in with a solution right away, ask your kids to brainstorm some instead. This not only helps them start problem solving but sets up a stronger possibility that in the future they won't rely on you to come up with ideas. If kids need help brainstorming we can ask them, "Would you like to hear one or two ideas I have after listening to you?"

Agree on a solution.

The goal isn't always to find something that everyone is thrilled about but instead something that we can all live with. Wrap up your conversation with, "It sounds like you both agree that taking turns playing makes sense and that you want to flip a coin to see who has the first turn. Is this a plan you can both live with?"

Not every conflict needs a long mediation

The higher touch approach is really useful for helping kids build skills. But not every single conflict requires this longer and more drawn out process. The strategy of limits and consequences can help us avoid long drawn out lectures and constant negotiation over "problem spots" between siblings.

For example, you can try, "We agreed that there would be no fighting over video games. Because you chose to fight you are choosing no gaming today. I have confidence that tomorrow you will be able to play games together without fighting."

Comparison breeds conflict

Siblings often fight because they are competing with one another. While sibling competition is normal, there are things that we can do to avoid amplifying these dynamics. Find ways to turn competition into cooperation and avoid constant comparison between siblings.

INSTEAD OF

Who can clean up faster?

I'll give you another more so you can have the exact same amount as your brother.

Did you see how Abdi got all of his homework done without complaining?

I love you the exact same as your sibling.

Why don't you put away your coat like your sister?



TRY

Do you think you two can clean up in ten minutes? Let's set a timer and see. Go team go!

Are you telling me you are hungry? Would like another small scoop of rice? Sure.

Looks like homework is tough today. When your homework is done, then you can hang with your friends. What's your plan and can I help at all?

I love being your parent and I love you.

This coat goes on the hook.

Catch Siblings Being Great

It is easy to get stuck in negative ruts when it comes to sibling conflict. We stop "seeing" cooperative or kind behavior and focus our attention only on bickering and fighting. Make sure to affirm your kids when you see them working out conflict in effective ways.

Try, "You two were so angry and you found your way through it. Way to go!"

Try, "It's not always easy to live together is it? I love how you found your way through that tough spot by deciding to just take some time apart this afternoon."

Try, "It's confusing sometimes to have a baby in the house who doesn't understand how to share! You did a great job not hitting your sister when she grabbed your toy just now. Everyone gets to be safe in our house. We are also here to help you since she isn't old enough to understand your words."