



ENDING



# *Sibling*

RIVALRY



MOVING YOUR KIDS FROM WAR TO PEACE



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## *The Importance of Getting Along*



My arrival eleven years after her birth pushed my sister Shawn from the position of youngest in our family. That transition may—or may not—have contributed to the infamous egg-on-the-slide incident. When I was four years old, my mother left me in the care of Shawn. We had a metal swing set in the backyard, and I begged Shawn to get a piece of waxed paper to sit on and slide down “fast as lightning.” Shawn went inside for the waxed paper but came out instead with a raw egg.

Lobbing the egg with perfect precision, she timed its descent to coincide with my arrival at the end of the slide. Splat! I shot off the slide like a bullet, landing hard on the ground, covered in egg goop. To this day, Shawn insists that she was “only trying to help me go fast” down the slide, but no one believes her.

Many brothers and sisters have similar stories of conflict, which has been a hallmark of sibling relationships since the beginning of time. Biblical examples of brother and sister fights abound. Cain killed Abel because he was jealous that God accepted Abel’s offering and not his, that Abel was first in God’s

eyes. Jacob wanted to be the firstborn, and so he tricked his twin, Esau, out of his birthright. Sisters Leah and Rachel had their share of disagreements over their husband, Jacob. His father's favoritism of Joseph triggered jealousy and hatred in Joseph's brothers.

Literature also has numerous instances of sibling rivalry. It's no surprise that Shakespeare frequently turned to sibling conflict in his plays. *King Lear* shows the father provoking his three daughters to compete for his love, while sisters Bianca and Kate fight constantly in *The Taming of the Shrew*. *As You Like It* has two sets of siblings in contention with each other: Oliver and Orlando, and Duke Senior and Duke Frederick.

Many famous real-life siblings have had public conflicts. The Andrews Sisters—that powerhouse singing trio of LaVerne, Patty, and Maxene of the 1930s and '40s—played nice onstage but clashed loudly offstage. Twins Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren—dueling advice columnists for many years—had a relationship that waxed and waned in terms of rivalry for most of their adult lives.

As these examples show, sibling rivalry can cause lasting rifts that destroy relationships. The ripple effect of unresolved sibling conflict goes beyond the brothers and sisters directly involved in the fight to the rest of their family and even friends too.

## Setting the Spark

The term “sibling rivalry” didn't become part of the child-rearing vocabulary until the twentieth century. Child psychiatrist David Levy coined—and then popularized—the term in the 1930s following a series of experiments that supposedly exposed the aggression of siblings toward each other.<sup>1</sup> Levy followed in Sigmund Freud's footsteps in positing that brother and sister animosity was part of every sibling relationship.

What most parents fail to realize is that while conflict between brothers and sisters is inevitable, the interaction between siblings doesn't have to become a rivalry. Siblings fight for a variety of reasons; each family has its own list because each family dynamic is different. But there are some general causes as to why siblings fight with each other, and understanding the rationale can help parents look beyond the conflict to solutions.

In an informal survey of parents with multiple children that I conducted, the number-one instigators of sibling fights were toys and possessions, followed by being teased and jealousy. Wanting parental attention rounded out the top four reasons. "My number-one concern is that sibling conflict will leave a lasting mark," said Meghan of Arlington, Virginia. "I worry most about the middle child, who is often lambasted by her older brother."

Most articles and books on siblings and sibling rivalry list similar reasons why kids fight, but at the core of it all is a desire to be number one and to be first in all things, whether it's getting dessert or getting to the car. This is innate in all children because it's at the core of our own sinfulness: the selfishness of *me*. Generally, everyone has a selfishness problem, and that selfishness comes out in a variety of ways, including siblings who have a hard time not fighting. Sibling rivalry, if left unchecked, can infiltrate the family unit. If not addressed, sibling rivalry can weaken the family as a whole.

## Getting Along

Why should parents care that their children are fighting? Jeffrey Kluger summed it up in his 2011 book, *The Sibling Effect: What the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us*:

A household with multiple siblings is a parliament of personalities that are forever in motion—and often in conflict. . . . But it can be an educational one, too: Adulthood, after

all, is practically defined by peer relationships—the workplace, the marriage, the community group. As siblings, we may fight and sulk and fume, but by nighttime, we still return to the same twin beds in the same shared room.<sup>2</sup>

Kluger's point underscores that being pleasant and kind to one another has a more far-reaching significance than peace at that moment. Children who learn to resolve conflict within a family through interactions with brothers and sisters have an advantage when they encounter discord outside of the home.

Parents also should realize that their actions can play a role in sibling rivalry. Delving a bit deeper into the story of Jacob and Esau brings to light just how influential parents can be with sibling conflict. From their childhood, the two brothers never got along, and their animosity triggered some of the most tragic stories in the Bible: Esau selling his birthright (Genesis 25:29-34) and Jacob tricking his father for Esau's blessing (Genesis 27). The brothers parted company in anger (Esau) and fear (Jacob), and the two stayed estranged for many years.

Their parents both were culpable of hindering—instead of helping—the relationship between the twins. Genesis 25:27-28 shows how Isaac and Rebekah's favoritism and their failure to teach the boys to get along soured their sons' interactions: "When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob."

That also points to the most important reason why parents should assist their children in moving from sibling rivals to friends: They will not be children long, and the things learned—or not learned—in childhood can have a long reach into adulthood. Carolyn Greene of Powhatan, Virginia, shared that her son and daughter became close in childhood, a state that has continued into adulthood.

“I like to think they got along so well because, when they were very young and rivalries broke out between them, I sat them in chairs facing each other and asked them to tell the other the best thing they liked about them,” said Carolyn. “Obviously, as young children, they had trouble articulating, so I prompted them with things like, ‘Remember the time you told me [something good] about [sibling]?’ That child would nod in agreement, and the other seemed surprised and pleased to hear such positive statements. It only took about three times, but those short sessions changed and strengthened the dynamics between them that has lasted the rest of their lives.”

As Carolyn’s story illustrates, the significance of siblings being friends more than enemies involves more than a surface calm for your household. There are some lasting benefits to nixing sibling rivalry among your offspring. Here are some reasons why getting along with brothers and sisters is so important.

**Lasting friendship.** Most parents know that their children won’t be kids for long, but what many of them fail to consider is that what happens in childhood can have an impact into adulthood. One theme about sibling fighting that kept popping up among parents I talked with was the fear that conflict in childhood would lead to estrangement when the children grow up. “I’m concerned that the fighting of my three elementary-school-age children will create a distance between them that will last into adulthood,” said Ashley Turner of Birmingham, Alabama.



## PARENTAL VISION

From large to small, successful companies are the ones that have a mission statement or vision for the future. All policies, procedures, and strategic goals are centered around fulfilling that vision. Parents who develop a vision for their children will find it helps their day-to-day decisions as well as their future

planning. Coming up with such a “parental vision” for your kids is fairly easy. (Parental vision was originally proposed by family psychologist John Rosemond in several columns and books and is used here with permission.)

Simply write down the answer to the following question: If someone asked you to describe each of your children at age thirty, what would you say?

It’s practically guaranteed that hardly anyone reading this book wrote down one or more of the following:

- Graduated at the top of his high school or college class
- Went to an Ivy League school
- Played a professional sport
- Has a fancy house
- Has a high-paying job

Instead, most parents would jot down things like the following:

- Compassionate
- Godly
- Hardworking
- Honest
- Kind
- Loving
- Respectful
- Responsible
- Thoughtful
- Truthful

When comparing the two lists, you’ll notice that the first one is all about achievements—status symbols and the like that mark a person’s “place” in this world. The second list is all about characteristics, what makes a man or woman underneath the outer trappings of material things. If what you really want for your children is for them to become good, upstanding citizens, then you will need to raise them with these characteristics in mind.

Talk with your spouse about your parental vision for each of your children at age thirty. Write down your list and post it someplace where you can reference it on a regular basis. Think



about what's on the list; then, ask yourself if your decisions as a parent reflect the vision you have for your kids. How do the things you encourage your children to accomplish build toward the vision you have for them as adults?

Now whenever you wonder what to do about discipline, consequences, addressing behavior, or virtually any parental decision, think about that vision. For example, if your child shirks his chores, remember that you want him to be hardworking and responsible. That should assist you in correcting his behavior. If your child is mean to her sibling, keep in mind you want her to grow up to be loving—and then act accordingly.

When you have a clear vision for your children, your parenting decisions will become easier. Taking the long-term view of raising kids will help you in the short term. Having a vision for your kids and keeping that vision in mind as you parent will get you over both the rough and smooth patches of child-rearing.



That's why parents should raise their children with an eye to how they want these kids to be at age thirty. Develop a parental vision for your child as an adult, and make your parenting decisions with that in mind. This is especially applicable when it comes to handling sibling rivalry. If you want your children to be friends later in life—or at least cordial to each other across the table at holiday meals—then pay attention now to sibling conflict.

Tiffany Amber Stockton, mother of two preschoolers in Colorado Springs, Colorado, put it this way: “What troubles me most when they fight is that they won't realize what potential exists for them to be great friends and will continue with the animosity.”

**Conflict resolution.** “I see sibling fights as the place where they first learn about conflict,” said Betsy DeMarco, a mother of two boys and two girls in Fairfax, Virginia. Knowing how to resolve the inevitable conflicts that we come across in our life-

times can be one of the best gifts we can give our kids. Learning the ins and outs of negotiation, peacemaking, and diffusing anger are skills that will be well used. (Chapter 7 will cover in detail how to teach conflict resolution to kids.)

What concerns Elaine Carilli of Columbia, South Carolina, the most when her six children between the ages of two and fourteen squabble is “that they will never be able to get along, resolve conflict, live in peace, and love each other.” She makes it a point to help her children get along by using Scripture to teach them what the Bible says about loving one another and how much God loves us. “I emphasize that love and how it calls us to put others before ourselves,” she said.

**A preserving spirit.** Sometimes, a brother or sister won’t readily give in to the request (or demand) of a sibling. The asking party often will regroup and try again until a more satisfactory outcome is achieved—or until he realizes his sibling isn’t going to budge. Siblings also push each other to finish tasks, learn something new, or excel at a sport.

In our house, my four children cajole and press each other to figure out things like riding a bike without training wheels, climbing the monkey bars, and tying shoes. This type of interaction also shows how much the siblings care about one another. Whether it’s by not giving assistance when begged or by shouting encouragement on the spot, brothers and sisters can be just the impetus kids need to achieve their goal.

**Wordplay.** Who doesn’t recall a brother or sister saying something mean to you or having just the right word at the right time? Julie Arduini of Youngstown, Ohio, doesn’t want her two children to “use words that tear the other down,” when fighting. While that old nursery rhyme about words not hurting is catchy, we all have had experiences where the power of words cut us deeply.

That's why what we don't allow our children to say—and what we do encourage them to say—has more consequences than we might think. (We'll discuss this more in subsequent chapters.) As children learn to get along with siblings, they also can develop the skills to use words wisely. Parents play a crucial role in helping children bridle their tongues when it comes to their brothers and sisters—and others they come in contact with as well.

**All about me.** By encouraging our kids to get along, we're also reminding them to think of others before themselves. "We are all self-centered," said Jennifer Coffin, a Fairfax, Virginia, mother of three grown children. While that focus on self is something we all spend a lifetime overcoming, we should remember that selfishness is often at the center of sibling rivalry.

Part of our job as parents is to show our children how to think of others. (Chapter 2 will explore more fully how to teach this concept to our children.) "I don't want my children to consider themselves more important than their siblings," added Lelia Jones, a mother of three elementary-school-age children in Columbia, South Carolina. She asks them to think about how they can love their siblings that day, such as fixing drinks or food for one another.

**Open hands.** Siblings who learn to live in harmony also have mostly mastered the art of sharing. This doesn't mean automatically giving in to the other's requests for toys or attention, but that we should say yes more than we say no.

In our house, we stress how being generous with our things and time is a way of blessing others. For example, I remind my older girls that reading to their younger brothers when asked is a small way to show their love. This doesn't mean a child has to share a toy or time every time a sibling asks, but we should gently remind our children of how being less territorial with

our things and time is honoring to God. (Chapter 9 covers this topic in more detail.)

## **A Strong Bond**

The more your children get along in childhood, the deeper their relationships will be in adulthood. That's not to say that brothers and sisters who fought all through high school are doomed to have a terrible relationship in college and beyond—there is hope that those more contentious interactions will become calmer later in life. However, as parents, we have a duty to give our children the tools they need to become responsible adults—ones with whom we will want to spend time.

When our children are young, we must be willing to guide them to have an appreciation for each other, to resolve conflict in a positive and uplifting manner, to have an open heart for their siblings, and to build each other up rather than tear each other down.

Sibling conflict is the first class a child receives in relationship training. If a parent emphasizes honor and other virtues in family life, such as serving others, valuing others, and listening to others' opinions, then sibling interactions are likely to change for the better. While no family will ever be entirely free from conflict, we can have a home without sibling rivalry.

***“Ending Sibling Rivalry solves the problem of sibling conflict by addressing the core issues. Sarah Hamaker tackles a much-needed topic with a commonsense and practical approach.”***

**—John Rosemond**

**Family Psychologist, Nationally Syndicated Columnist, Author**

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## STOP THE FIGHTING!

“He hit me!”

“She won’t stay on her side of the room!”

“Leave my stuff alone!”

Is your day punctuated by tattling, tears, and endless squabbles among your children? Does your home sometimes feel like a war zone? Do you wonder why your kids can’t get along? You’re not alone. Sibling rivalry can be one of the most frustrating problems parents face.

But conflict is not an inevitable outcome in your household. It is possible to help your children move from enemies to friends. In *Ending Sibling Rivalry*, Sarah Hamaker provides practical solutions to this familiar problem, helping you understand the roots of—and remedies for—sibling rivalry.

Whether your children are toddlers or teenagers, *Ending Sibling Rivalry* provides the blueprint for reducing sibling conflict and building a more calm, loving relationship among your children.

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As an author and certified Leadership Parenting Coach™, Sarah Hamaker guides parents in identifying, discussing, and correcting bad parenting habits. Sarah also assists parents in learning successful behaviors absent from their current child-rearing repertoire. She blogs about parenting on her website, [www.parentcoachnova.com](http://www.parentcoachnova.com), and is a featured parent coach on [www.parentguru.com](http://www.parentguru.com).

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