

# Handling Sibling Rivalry

## Avoid Comparison and Roles

- Beware of making comparisons between siblings, especially in relation to guidance or discipline.
- Help kids see themselves outside of typical roles (e.g. the clumsy one, the nice one or the less smart one). When a child says, "I'm mean," you can say, "*And I see you do nice things, like...*" The idea is just to introduce the thought periodically, not to try to talk the child into it.
- Often kids hear us making comparisons when we're talking to other adults or when we're on the phone. Children take what we say to others about them to heart, sometimes more so than when we speak to them directly.

## Avoid the Fairness Trap

- "Mom, she has a bigger slice of pizza than I do." Rather than getting into the discussion of whose piece is bigger, it is much more useful to ask, "*Are you still hungry?*"
- The Fairness Trap along with the Whodunit Dance below can be like quick sand. If you step in it, you may be there for a while.

## Help Each Child to Feel Unique and Valued for Who They Are

- Take time for individual child directed play with each child at least a couple times per week.
- Have children spend time alone with each parent along occasionally. This can even be just running an errand.
- Consider having *Remembering Time* with children, especially older siblings, where you playfully hold your child in your lap sideways like a baby and tell her about how you used feed her, change her diaper, burp her, etc. Kids universally seem to feel very valued when they hear about how they were taken care of and that you knew them well and cared for them during years they can't even remember. Remembering Time once in a while can take some of the sting out of seeing younger siblings getting so much attention.

## Keep in Mind That Sibling Fighting Serves Some Positive Functions

- Often arguing can be pretty entertaining, and certainly beats boredom for most kids.
- Children often argue and fight to draw us in for attention (though this isn't the right time to give attention to them if we want less fighting).
- Children rightly perceive that often home is a safe place to practice riskier social skills. Kids can try out ways of interacting that wouldn't be safe to try at school. They know at a gut level that their sibling will still be there tomorrow and will likely talk to them again soon.

## **Distinguish Between Noise Problems and Getting Along Problems**

- Love and Logic points out that often we treat what is a simple noise problem as a relationship problem and attempt to intervene at the relationship level. This is almost always time consuming and often not very effective.
- If you decide to intervene at the relationship level remember to do it at a *happy time* or a *neutral time* when everyone is more capable of reasoning and when you're not giving attention to the misbehavior.

## **The Whodunit Dance**

- Trying to piece together who did what to whom, and in what order it was done can eat up huge amounts of your parenting time and energy.
- Ask yourself if the problem is large enough to warrant the energy and time needed to figure out who started it. Remember that each child will have the tendency to tell you the way they see it. If children are young enough, they will often describe events the way they wish they had played out.
- Some alternatives to the Whodunit Dance are 1) Give empathy and leave them to work it out, 2) say, "Is this something you guys can work out, or would you be better off playing on your own?" then separate if things aren't going more smoothly soon after, or 3) separate immediately which has the benefit of helping them to learn that with you getting into fights leads to less fun and attention rather than more of either.

## **Recommended Reading on Sibling Rivalry**

Ames, Louise Bates and Carol Chase Haber. *He Hit Me First: When Brothers and Sisters Fight*. New York: Warner, 1982.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.

Faber, Adele and Elaine Mazlish. *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too*. New York: Avon, 1987.

Samalin, Nancy. *Loving Each One Best: A Caring and Practical Approach to Raising Siblings*. New York: Bantam, 1996.

Note: *He Hit Me First* by Louise Bates Ames does a really nice job looking at some of the ways that siblings actually enjoy and benefit from their arguments.