

# Help! My Children Are Fighting Again!

©Kathryn Kvols 2008

Why do children fight? Children fight to get their parents to choose one child over the other, to release tension and sometimes they fight because they are bored and fighting creates excitement.

There is probably no activity that evokes more frustration from parents than fighting. How can we stop and prevent fighting? First let's look at some things we do unintentionally to encourage their fights.

- **Use comparisons.** "I wish you would get good grades like your sister." Statements like this make children feel resentful toward their sibling.
- **Use competition:** "Whoever gets to the car first, wins!" This seems like an innocent statement however, it provokes competition and encourages fighting words like, "I get to sit in the front seat, I was here first!"
- **Tell them not to feel negative feelings** towards their sibling. This is the way we teach our children to be afraid to share their feelings with us. The feelings don't go away; they are likely to intensify because they're never dealt with in a healthy way. Instead of saying, "You don't hate your brother," empathize with your child's anger. Say, "I can understand that you're really angry with Jason right now."
- **Force children to share.** Be sure your child has some things he doesn't have to share.
- **Have a favored child.** Children are very sensitive to parents who show favoritism. Children get favored for different reasons: being the "baby," being chronically sick, or excelling in an activity that requires a lot of time and attention. Feeling like one child gets more attention than another (either positive or negative attention) creates resentment.
- **Rescue.** Often we feel the need to rescue one child from another. This sets up a victim/bully mentality that is not healthy. Believe it or not, your victim often provokes the bully so that she can get rescued!

As parents, we have a unique opportunity: to teach our children how to handle conflict in a way that will affect your children for the rest of their life! The skills they learn now will be used on the playground as children, in the boardroom as a business person, and in the bedroom as a spouse. Here are some suggestions:

**Children develop patterns of dealing with conflict that they will use for a lifetime.**

## 1. Demonstrate self-control

Teach your child to breathe deeply in through his nose and out through his mouth to the count of ten when he feels angry. This will relax him and give him time to think before acting. Model using this technique yourself.

## 2. Show how to take turns and trade

Teach children how to take turns or to trade one thing for another. It helps to use an impartial aid like a timer to say how long a child has to wait before she has a turn.

## 3. Teach empathy

Teach your children to consider each other's feelings. For example, "How do you think Eric feels?"

#### **4. Teach repair.**

If your child has hurt another child say, "Eric looks sad. What could you do or say to help him feel better?" Use a friendly, non-guilt provoking tone of voice.

#### **5. Model respect.**

Children need to learn how to join others in play in positive ways. Aggressive or whiny children are not welcome playmates. Teach your child how to play with others by role-playing with dolls or puppets. Let him play with two puppets, and you be the third who wants to join. Behave in ways that are not acceptable and talk about what to do differently, and then have your child practice.

#### **6. Concentrate on win/win negotiation.**

Negotiation means both kids get what they want and need. Ask, "How can you both win?" Make sure they are both happy with the solution or it will backfire. Guide their negotiations by creating an opportunity for each person to talk about their feelings, and creative ideas. Promote the concept that the best solution is one in which everyone gets what they want.

**Promote the concept that the best solution is the one where everyone gets what they want.**

#### **7. Stress teamwork and cooperation.**

Use phrases like, "Let's see how fast we can get this done by working together." "Wow! Look how fast we got that done as a team!"

#### **8. Refuse to choose.**

If siblings are fighting over what book is read to them, say, "When the two of you have decided which book you want me to read, come and get me." This keeps you from having to choose one child over the other, teaches them how to negotiate and to be responsible for solving their problems.

#### **9. Redirect child who gives in.**

Children who develop a pattern of giving in often feel resentful and continue this pattern into adulthood. Teach this child how to assert herself and get what she wants.

#### **10. Schedule activities.**

If your children are fighting because they are bored, redirect that energy into some positive activity. Children frequently fight after watching too much television.

#### **11. Be Creative.**

For example, one mother turns on music when the kids fight. They have all agreed to dance when the music starts. This helps release the tension in a healthy way.

If you are a parent of single children, these same principles work when you invite friends or when you are with relatives.

Children develop patterns of dealing with conflict that they will use for a lifetime. Some children learn to become victims, some bullies, and some learn healthy ways for handling conflict. The goal is not to stop or eliminate conflict. The goal is to teach your child how to deal with conflict effectively. Parents have an important influence on which patterns children will choose.

Parents often ignore fighting, hoping that it will stop. Or they minimize fighting, thinking that it's "simply child's play." Courageous is the parent who wants their children to develop good conflict

resolution skills and who wants more peace in their family. If you are one of these parents, try one of these suggestions. Get help from a parenting class or therapist if you need further advice.

Kathryn Kvols is the author of the best selling book and popular parenting course, "Redirecting Children's Behavior." She is an international speaker and the president of the International Network for Children and Families. She can be reached at 877-375-6498 or you can view other helpful articles at the website