

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose – No. 1 parenting educator



Healthy Sibling Relationships

Kids learn so much through sibling relationships. It's from siblings they learn to solve conflict and how to maintain friendships, just as they learn about gender from their brothers and sisters.

"Will they ever be friends?"

This was my wife talking as she took a deep breath and waded into the murky waters of another noisy sibling fight in our home. Like many couples in the 1980's we had three children quite close together, which we've since learned tends to increase the likelihood of sibling competition.

Fast-forward two decades it's pleasing to see that the three siblings enjoy relatively close relationships, often turning to each other rather than their parents when problems and issues arise.

Like world peace, family harmony is an admirable concept worthy of aspiration but well nigh impossible to attain. It seems that kids in families are programmed to fight with each other, but parents also have the power to facilitate learning.

When parents take an active approach to helping their children resolve their fights, they are teaching them a valuable life skill as well as reducing the incidence of fighting over the long term. Here are some ideas;

1. MODEL good conflict resolution skills

Kids wear L plates when it comes to solving disputes. Some kids will yell, get abusive or even get physical when they are settling disputes. Show them better ways of sorting out problems by



talking things through with your partner, compromising and apologising when you've said something upsetting to your partner or your children.

2. Help kids MANAGE their emotions

"Yep, it would make me mad too if someone said that to me." Usually someone's feelings get hurt when siblings argue so make sure you recognise their emotions without taking sides. This focus on feelings helps kids develop emotional literacy and promotes empathy in siblings as well.

3. MONITOR sibling relationships

Keep your antenna up for the signs of discord within sibling relationships. Some disputes kids can sort out themselves, but you need to be ready to intervene and assist kids in the peace-brokering, or at least to act as a safety net when one child continually appears on the wrong end of a power imbalance.

4. MENTOR them to sort out disputes

Kids need the chance to sort their conflict out themselves, but sometimes they need a little coaching. Don't waste time trying to sort out who started an argument. Instead make some suggestions such as taking turns, giving way, bargaining and swapping.

5. Encourage them to MAKE-UP

Kids often get over disputes far quicker than adults. They can be squabbling one minute and cuddling up the next, so it gets tricky intervening sometimes. However there are times when you need to encourage a child to mend bridges with an aggrieved sibling. This can mean kids have to swallow their pride, admit that they may be wrong, make an apology or make some sort of restitution such as doing a special favour. This type of restoration means kids must take responsibility for their behaviours and is a sign of growing maturity.

The sibling relationship will last longer than the parent-child relationship and is just as influential on children's development as the parent-child relationship. It's important for parents to foster sibling closeness so that the sibling bonds will stay for life.

Michael Grose is exploring the wonderful world of Sibling Relationships in his national seminar tour in March. You can also catch it on DVD.

Find out more at parentingideas.com.au/parents.