

INSIGHTS

by Michael Grose - No. 1 parenting educator



Sorting out sibling squabbles



"Healthy families know how to fight well. 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."

If your kids constantly fight with each other, then don't despair. All that emotional energy isn't going to waste.

According to a recent study sibling fights teach kids important conflict resolution skills. In fact, parents who stop their children from arguing may well be depriving them of important learning opportunities.

Researcher Laurie Kramer from the University of Illinois in the US found that kids who learned how to argue with their siblings had more advanced emotional development.

Anecdotally, it seems that sibling fighting is one of the biggest impediments to parents enjoying family life. Many parents tell me that if their children stopped bickering their lives would improve dramatically.

Many parents also worry that their children who fight with each other will not get along as adults. The evidence doesn't support this view. The test for strong families is more about the willingness for kids to pull together when the chips are down, than the frequency of the squabbling.

Healthy families know how to fight well. 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;

- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Focus on emotions.** When kids come to you for help, say something like: "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
- ✓ **Explain why siblings may have behaved the way they do.** Ask questions like, "What do you think she meant by that?" Kids are faulty observers and only see one side during disputes. It's the job of parents to round out the picture, and help kids see that there are two sides to any dispute.
- ✓ **Coach them on sorting 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.

- ✓ **Encourage them to restore their relationships.** 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.

Children without siblings can learn conflict resolution skills by spending time with other peers and friends, and having parents who are willing to argue with them without coming on too strong or laying down the law.

Conflict and siblings tend to go together like bread and butter. While sibling squabbles can be annoying, they also offer parents great opportunities to help kids to handle conflict effectively, which is a great life skill.



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