

Family Squabbles

Parents often worry about brothers and sisters quarrelling. A certain amount of quarrelling is normal for children in families. It is one of the ways that they learn how to get on with other people. Quarrelling can be positive. Sometimes, however, you will need to step in when tempers become frayed and you can see that things are getting out of control.

Learning to get on with others

Arguments between brothers and sisters are one of the ways that children learn to respect other people's belongings and feelings. It is one of the ways children learn to solve problems. Learning to argue fairly and without hurting each other will help them get on with others.

Parents' attention

Children in families also fight about parents' love. To children, love means time and attention. If you seem to have more time for one child than you do for another, they are likely to be jealous.

Often an older child who feels hurt and angry will try to get a new baby or younger child in some way. If the parents then rescue the younger child (as they have to) and at the same time punish the older child, it makes the older feel more unloved and misunderstood.

This can become a habit, where one child always seems to be the one who starts the fights, the parents feel that they should rescue the child who is being picked on. This makes the one who "started it" feel worse, and so this child will start another fight when the chance comes.

Remember, the child who seems to start the quarrel is not always the one who does so. Often one child will do something to annoy the other child knowing he will retaliate and then get into trouble.

What parents can do

Here are some steps you can take to help prevent quarrels.

Protect the needs of each child (e.g. prevent older children's activities from being interfered with by younger children and vice versa).

Spend special time with each child on a regular basis.

Allow each child to own some special things of their own that they don't have to share.

For younger children, see that there are more than one of the same toys so that they can play together without having to share.

If you have three children make sure that the same one is not left out every time. Invite other children over.

Children need their own bit of space which will not be interfered with by others, even if it is only a drawer.

Try not to compare children with each other this always leads to bad feelings.

Be generous with hugs and affection to all your children.

Make ground rules. Get your children to help you make some rules about what behaviour is not allowed in your home. Then if you have to step in, you do so because someone has broken a rule, not to take sides.

When you can see that children are feeling upset, help them to find ways to express their feelings through talking about them. Play that helps with feelings includes water play, painting, play dough. For older children it may be something like going for a run or playing their music. Talk with them about what helps.

Children need you to teach them how to solve problems, to listen to each other and then to look for solutions that are fair to both.

When you have to step in

Remember that it is better not to step in but to let your children learn to sort things out for themselves. They don't always need an umpire! Step in when behaviour is harming one of the children or things are getting out of control.

Be aware of your own feelings. If you are feeling angry with one child or more loving towards one particular child, make allowances for this so that you are fair.

If children come to you for help to sort out a problem, try not to take sides. If tempers are not out of control listen to each child so each feels heard. Tell them that you understand and that you think that they can sort it out for themselves, and you would like to hear what they decide to do to make things better. You might have to remind them of the family rules.

If they still need help to sort out the problem try to help them work it out together. Help them to listen to each other's feelings and try to work out ways to solve the problem. For example, if they are fighting over a TV program you might say: "Joe wants to watch this program and Maria wants to watch the other one. What are some things you can think of to do that would be fair?" You might have to help with suggestions at first. When they have agreed on a solution, give it a try and then check to make sure it is working. If not, have another try at working it out.

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