

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

Help! My Children are Fighting! (AGAIN!)



BY KIM DeMARCHI

While we look forward to the days of summer, we usually forget how much togetherness it actually brings. Seeing our children play together is obviously wonderful, but that real time togetherness also

lends itself to more sibling arguing, bickering, and fighting. It can be absolutely draining. I don't like it any more than you, however I've learned to see the conflict in a new light.

I think it's fairly safe to say that most parents don't like conflict and want to quickly extinguish it. I'm suggesting that parents have a paradigm shift in the way that they look at sibling conflict. Seeing this conflict as an opportunity to teach your children the essential life skill of conflict resolution will not only help them at home with their siblings, but with their friends at school now, friends and coworkers later in life, in their own relationships and marriage, and even eventually with their own children.

Let me give you a personal example: As a young child with my younger brother I learned how to build elaborate forts, dodge balls, make Lego cities, race Hot Wheels on tracks set up around the house, and have snowball fights. In those same scenarios I also learned how to walk away, stand up for myself, negotiate, share, take turns, and listen to and learn from others. Sometimes, we learn those important life skills in times of peace, perhaps while happily building forts together, and sometimes we learn those skills

during times of conflict, perhaps while trying to figure out how to construct our Lego creation with only so many pieces to be shared. We certainly can't eliminate all conflict, nor should we want to. We can, however, see conflict with our own children as a way to teach these valuable interpersonal skills that will eventually help our children negotiate their ever changing world.

Picture this scenario: Your son and daughter are sitting in the playroom fighting over a toy. You hear them from the other room and you start yelling, "Stop it! Give the toy back to the one who had it first! If this doesn't stop, we aren't going to the park later! If I have to come in there...." Of course, the fighting doesn't stop, you charge in there continuing to yell, grab the toy, punish the oldest by saying, "You're the oldest. You should know better!" Then, you give him a slap on the hand and say, "You do not hit your sister. We don't hit in this house!" You then console, pamper, and rescue the youngest. What conflict resolution skills



were you modeling and what did your children learn? They might have learned that they aren't responsible for the fighting, their parent is. They probably learned that they can get their parent to choose sides. They most definitely learned they can't solve their problems themselves and that their parent can overpower them by yelling, grabbing, and accusing.

A much more effective response to sibling fighting is to intervene and teach them the steps to create win/win negotiation:

1. Bring peace to the fight. Enter the room calmly and quietly. Don't say a word. Physically get on their level, preferably between them. Gently touch each child. Make eye contact.
2. If the children are fighting over a toy, when they have quieted, put your hand out to receive the toy. Do not grab the toy. Be patient. Wait for them to place the toy in your hand. If they don't after awhile, say "Toy please." If they still don't say, "You can put the toy in my hand, or I can help you." (which means you will take it if need be)
3. Empathize with the most emotionally charged child first. "Wow, it looks like...." Albert Einstein said, "You cannot solve a problem with the same energy it was created." Continue touching gently and looking at both. Be aware of not taking sides. You weren't there. You are not the judge or jury.
4. Turn their attention away from the fight and switch their focus on what they each want and need. Let them each speak to the other, taking turns talking and listening. You are facilitating the dialogue between them.
5. Ask them how they could work it out so they are both happy and

both win. Try using the phrase, "That's an idea!" to all of their suggestions when brainstorming to avoid judging someone's idea being better than another. Do not offer suggestions unless they get stuck. You can also respond, "I can see that solution would work for you, but do you think that would make your sister happy?"

6. Help them choose a final solution. Make sure they are both happy with the outcome.
7. Acknowledge both children specifically for the skills they demonstrated for solving their problem. ("You were patient, you were creative, you stuck up for your needs.") This helps them in identifying helpful skills to resolve future conflict.

I'm sure you are saying to yourself, "I don't have time to do this every time my children are fighting!" Don't worry! You don't have to. If you take the time to do these steps just several times a week, eventually they'll get the hang of it and do it on their own. I know this is a big investment of time now on the front end, but remember it's contributing to the life-long skills in your child's future. You can do it! Practice this skill and the next issue will also focus on other tools for minimizing the sibling rivalry and maximizing the relationship!

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To Parenting: Helping Parents Navigate their Parenting Journey. Kim's goal for you is to help reduce conflict, foster mutual respect, and create deeper communication and connections with your loved ones. She can be reached through www.EmpoweredParenting.com or www.PassportToParenting.com.