



Center for Early Education and Development

Questions About Kids

What Can I Do About Sibling Rivalry?

Probably the most valuable thing for parents to know about so-called “sibling rivalry” is that their children’s frequently obnoxious and sometimes impossible behavior is perfectly normal.

Dr. Benjamin Spock once noted that for a child to happily accept a new sibling is like asking a wife to accept her husband’s acquisition of a younger mistress. But most children soon adjust to the new baby and begin to feel pride and pleasure in him.

Unfortunately, this is usually a rather short, tranquil period before the next period of stress when that sweet little baby, to whom the older child was beginning to enjoy feeling superior, begins to get up and walk around and compete in a lot of new ways. While the parents are greeting baby’s new accomplishments with loud cries of joy and amazement, the older child may be sulking in a corner.

The basic problem in dealing with children’s feelings about their siblings is the immaturity of their thinking. Obviously, if you fill his little brother’s bowl too full, there may not be enough for him. When children feel that they are in direct competition for basic nurturance, they fight for their right to survive—a strength that we admire under other circumstances.

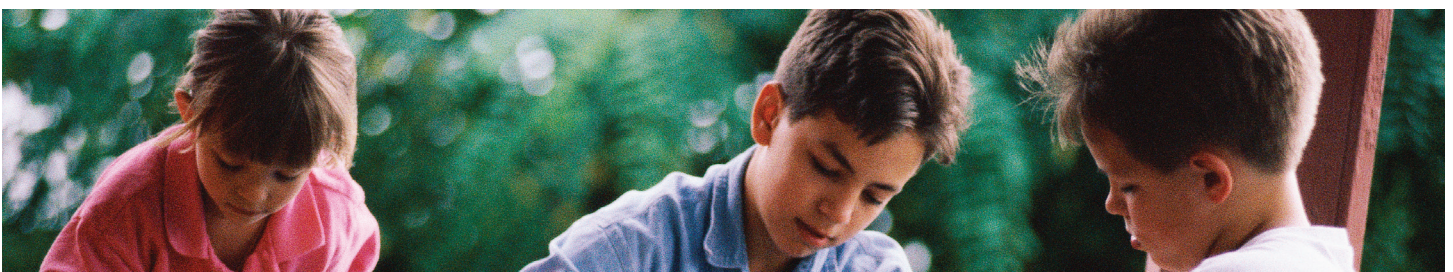
Telling him about your endless supply of love may help with older children, but demonstrating your love will probably work better. Also, be sure you spend some time alone with each of your children each day. It doesn’t have to be long or formal but each child should know he has a time with you each day when you are his alone.

It is also useful and fun to reminisce with your child about how life was for you and him when he was the age of the younger child. Show him pictures of himself, especially the ones with you, and tell him how much you enjoyed being with him then and now.

Many—probably most—adults still have residues of sibling rivalry. So don’t hold your breath and wait for some glorious moment when sibling rivalry will come to an end and your children will walk off hand in hand. They will walk off hand in hand over and over again, but there will also always be times when those same hands will be raised in threats or applied to a vulnerable part of his sibling’s body.

If you can think of it as a developmental necessity, it may help you to stay relatively tranquil as they struggle through those complicated feelings of love and hate and competition and rivalry which all children have for their brothers and sisters.

By Rita Warren, Minnesota.



Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

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