

Diffusing Sibling Rivalry

Parents with multiple children know that sibling relationships can be complicated, at times vacillating between being close friends and competitors. “Sibling rivalry is tricky,” says clinical psychologist Rebecca Kennedy. “The first step is realizing that kids do often see siblings as competitors. It’s tough to have a sibling because a sibling is, in some ways, competing for what can feel like the scarce resource of a parent’s attention or love.” Here are 7 ways parents can help diffuse sibling rivalry:

1. Designate one-on-one time with each child

One thing that parents can do to diffuse sibling jealousy and competitiveness is “to see each child for who he is,” says Kennedy. “Help each child feel valued in her uniqueness.” Having alone time with a parent is important. “The more filled up a child feels by a parent, the more connected they feel... to the parents [and] actually the more likely they’ll see siblings as playmates and not competitors.”

2. Do not compare siblings to each other

It is easy for some parents to try to motivate one child by comparing him or her to a sibling. But Kennedy suggests parents should look at how much they are “inadvertently reinforcing competition and comparison by pitting [siblings] against each other.” Think of ways to reframe conflict situations to take the focus away from the sibling, and to help the child to look inward and think about what *they* really want or need.

3. Be honest about how hard it can be

Kennedy says it is important to be honest with kids and “name what’s true,” while being empathetic. “Sometimes the best thing to help kids get along is just naming how hard it is to get along,” says Kennedy. She suggests saying something like, “It’s hard to be living through COVID-19 and not be able to see friends so we’re together all of the time. No wonder you’re fighting a little more. I get that.”

4. Slow down conflicts rather than solve them

To help resolve the inevitable conflicts that come up between siblings, Kennedy says one of the best things parents can do is to view their role as helping to slow down the conflict — not solve it. “When we see our role as helping our kids regulate the intensity of the emotion rather than come up with a solution... we leave space for kids to negotiate.”

5. Encourage siblings to get some space

Sometimes the best way to prevent or diffuse sibling rivalry is for kids to spend some time apart. “It’s not just about connecting in a healthy way... but also knowing that giving space is healthy, too,” says Janine Domingues, clinical psychologist with the Child Mind Institute. She suggests that parents talk with their kids about how there are times when everyone can come together as a family and do something fun together, but that it also is okay and healthy if a sibling wants some alone time.

6. Get the whole family involved

If tensions have been running high, Kennedy suggests having everyone get together and brainstorm about how to make things better, saying something like, “It’s been hard to get along. It’s been hard to have time that feels peaceful, and I have some ideas about what might help, but I’m sure you do, too. You’re both

kids with great ideas. I know we all want to have a household where we all get along a little better, so let's come together." Kennedy recommends explaining that "no one is in trouble," and suggests saying that, in fact, "everyone is coming to the table because we're all really important members of this family." Kennedy says that's a way of framing the issue as a "family dynamic we can all work on rather than pointing the blame."

7. Praise good behavior

To reinforce behavioral changes, try focusing less on reprimanding kids when they misbehave and more on the "positive opposite," suggests Domingues. In other words, "How can we catch them doing what we want them to do and praise them?" she says. It's about focusing on "positive reinforcement and positive praise for each sibling."

Source: Rachel Grumann Bender, award winning parenting writer and editor