Why Siblings Fight—And What to Do About It

By Charles Fay, Ph.D.

How many times do parents hear one of their kids screaming something like this: “Daaad! Brian won’t stop picking on me! Make him stop!”

And then Brian whines, “No I didn’t! Lisa started it! Why do I always get blamed for everything around here?”

Does this sound familiar? Do you ever feel as though your kids act more like hungry alley cats fighting over the last mouse in town than the loving sibs you’d hoped they’d grow to be? You are not alone!

What’s a parent to do when the kids are at each other’s throats and the living room looks like finals at the international wrestling championship? The first step toward success is understanding some of the reasons why siblings bicker and fight. Why is it that our children—our flesh and blood—often go for flesh and blood?

Let’s first recognize that sibling conflicts are generally a pretty typical and normal part of family life. In fact, one might argue that these conflicts are good training for life. That is, by negotiating childhood conflicts with their brothers or sisters, our kids learn valuable skills for getting along with others in the real world.

For this learning to happen, the following must take place in the home:

1. Children must witness their parents working out disagreements in a cooperative and nonviolent manner. Kids learn a lot from watching us.

2. Parents must place primary responsibility for solving sibling conflicts on the parties involved—the kids! In other words, parents stay out of it.

3. Parents share ideas on how the conflict might be resolved in a healthy manner.

Another reason siblings fight is because it gets them attention and control. When parents yell or lecture to determine “who started it,” to get their kids to “knock it off,” or to get their children to “say sorry and shake hands,” the parents are doing more thinking and worrying than the kids!

Soon the children learn on an unconscious level that they can control the color of their parents’ faces, the volume of their voices, their reserves of emotional energy, and the potential longevity of their cardiovascular systems.

And have you ever noticed how your kids tend to start a fight just as you start talking on the phone or start a quiet conversation with your spouse? What better way to control your parents?
Love and Logic

Fortunately, parents can do three things to keep their children from learning these unhealthy patterns:

1. Parents take care of themselves by making sure the conflict happens somewhere they can’t see or hear it. They say, “Feel free to continue this argument someplace where it doesn’t hassle my eyes or ears.”

2. If the parents are interrupted or inconvenienced by the fighting, they say, “This is so sad. How are you going to repay us for interrupting our conversation? Raking the yard will do.”

3. If one or both children resist completing the chore, the parent calmly says, “I’ll be happy to do the things I do for you around here when you decide to contribute to this family by doing chores.” The parent “goes on strike” until the child complies. In the meantime, the child can survive on “boring” and “yucky” food like apples, oranges, cold fried chicken, etc.

A third reason siblings fight is because one child in the family feels that the parents or other adults see him or her as being the “black sheep” of the family. He or she reasons on an unconscious level, “I’ll never be as good as my brother. Everybody thinks he’s so smart ... He’s such a goody-two-shoes ... I hate him!”

In most cases, the child doesn’t really hate his or her sibling. Instead, he or she hates the feeling of not measuring up in the eyes of the parents. The parents may not view the child in this manner. Nevertheless, the most important point is that the child “feels” it to be so.

Parents and teachers can do two things to help avoid this problem:

1. Don’t compare kids with each other. One of the most damaging statements I ever heard was made in the local K-Mart store by a frustrated father: “Why can’t you just sit and be good like your brother?”

2. Celebrate your children’s differences and focus primary energy on helping them identify and build upon their strengths. Research clearly shows us that personality and learning differences begin at or before birth. The more we try to make our kids the same, the more frustrated and angry everyone in the family becomes.

Help all of your children learn that everyone is different, and that everyone has something positive to contribute.

A fourth reason has to do with much more serious and dangerous types of problems. In rare instances, one or more children in the family—or the entire family—are experiencing such severe emotional distress that the rivalry has become dangerous.

What’s a parent to do if he or she sees this happening with children? Here are some suggestions:

1. Don’t ignore the problem. Make sure the children are adequately supervised and that they are not allowed to inflict serious damage upon each other. This is the one instance in which parents must intervene to ensure safety. Caution! With older children and teens, avoid trying to physically separate...
them. Call 911 or the police department for assistance if the conflict becomes violent.

2. Don’t hesitate to get professional help from a competent psychologist or therapist. There are solutions to these types of sibling conflicts, but these solutions require family therapy and ongoing work with a solid mental health professional.

Once we’ve gotten a handle on what might be causing rivalry and conflicts between our children, it’s time to take action! Recently, I received a letter from a mom who was using Love and Logic. It read something like this:

Dear Dr. Fay,

I’m writing this letter to tell you about my two sons. Mike is eight and Eric is ten. They used to argue and fight constantly, and my husband and I were about to pull our hair out. Then one night we decided to use some Love and Logic.

This night, near the end of December, our boys wanted to go camping in the front yard. They wanted to set up their tent and pretend. Since it’s been in the twenties and thirties at night lately, I told them they could set up their tent in the living room or the basement instead.

Boy, did this ever start a fight! Eric wanted to camp in the basement, but Mike wanted to camp in the living room.

My husband and I decided to stay out of it and let them work it out. They did! Mike gave in to Eric, and they both ran off to the basement to arrange their campsite. About 2:00 in the morning we heard a horrible sound. Eric and Mike ran into our bedroom pushing and shoving.

Eric screamed, “Mom! Daaad! Mike bit me!” Then he held up his arm. No blood, but some slight teeth marks.

Mike started screaming too. “He started it! He started it!”

My husband and I were so frustrated we felt like strangling them. Instead, I remembered to use sadness instead of anger. I also remembered that it is okay to delay a consequence until you have a plan.

I looked at my boys and said, “Oh no, guys. Bad decision waking us up. Guess your father and I will have to do something about this tomorrow. Try not to worry about it.”

It was great! I’d never seen them look so confused. Then my husband said, “Go ahead and fight somewhere that won’t keep us awake.”

When the boys continued to argue, I said, “The longer you keep us awake, the sadder it’s going to be for you tomorrow.”

The next morning, both of them came to us and asked what we were going to do. My husband told them they could take the day to think about how they might make it up to us by doing some chores.
During dinner that evening, I could tell both of them were about to explode. Finally, they couldn’t take it any longer and told us they wanted to wash our cars to make up for the problem.

My husband said, “That’s a start. Throw in cleaning the bath-tubs and toilets and we have a deal.” The funniest thing was that the boys actually looked relieved!

Now, when the boys start fighting, we just look at them and say something like, “This is so sad. I wonder if you’ll need to do some chores to pay us back for all this noise and hassle.”

It’s amazing how quickly they stop arguing. This doesn’t always work. But that’s good, because then I get a break from some of my chores! Sometimes I even find myself looking forward to their fights.

Sincerely,

A Happier Mom