



# First Steps

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## Sibling Rivalry

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

The word “sibling” refers to brothers and sisters, and “sibling rivalry” means the competitive feelings and actions that often occur among children in a family. “Sibling rivalry is a normal part of family living. It is not a reflection on parents’ effectiveness. Sibling rivalry occurs because each child wants all of the parents’ love and attention. It actually means that the child has formed a healthy attachment to the parents. It is natural, also, for siblings to have both positive and negative feelings about each other. This is part of living in close contact where feelings get expressed, especially if the children are close in age and the same sex.”

Source: Parents as Teachers National Center, Inc., 1997



### What Can Parents Do to Reduce Sibling Rivalry?

- Prepare older siblings for the birth of a new baby. Give the older child a lifelike baby doll and role play ahead of time what caring for a newborn will be like.
- Spend time with the older child when the baby is awake, not just when the baby is napping. Find “special” time for each child to show that he or she is loved individually.
- Treat children as individuals. Help them understand that they are treated differently by you and have different privileges and responsibilities because they are different individuals. Spend one on one time with each child every day.
- Respect each child’s space, toys, and time. Understand when an older child wants to be alone or away from his sibling for short periods of time.
- Encourage both shared and separate possessions. Allow each child to have his or her own things, but also provide shared items (like the TV or games).
- Avoid labeling or comparing one child to the other. Try not to “feed” their rivalry. Pay attention to how you treat each child to see if you are adding to the feelings of jealousy by comparing or playing favorites.
- Model and reward cooperation, not competition. Praise children when they are getting along or when they work out their own disagreements.
- Teach children to express negative feelings about siblings in socially acceptable ways. It is not OK to hit a brother or sister; it is OK to hit a pillow. It is not OK to say “I hate you!” It is OK to say “I am angry!”
- Teach children to express positive feelings about siblings. Siblings like to hear “I love you” from each other.

All families that have more than one child have to understand and deal with sibling rivalry. It is normal, and in most cases, very helpful for children to learn to handle minor struggles that occur within the family. Sibling rivalry is usually strongest between same sex siblings who are one to three years apart in age. Your goal as a parent should not be to eliminate sibling rivalry, but rather to minimize it.

Source: Forehand, Rex, PhD. and Nicholas Long, PhD., Parenting the Strong-Willed Child

## Benefits of Sibling Rivalry

- Children learn relationship skills, how to cooperate and settle differences.
- Children learn problem-solving skills, including how to explain a problem, think up ways to solve the problem, decide what to try, and find out what works and what doesn't work.
- Children learn to stand up for themselves.
- Children learn to respect other's rights.
- Children learn the difference between being clever and hurtful by seeing a sibling's reaction.
- Siblings learn to identify, experience, and express both positive and negative emotions.
- Children learn that mixed feelings are natural, but that there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to express them to each other.
- From living with others, each child develops a personal identity.
- Children begin to realize that life isn't always fair!

## Handling Disagreements

- Try to overlook minor conflicts between children. Let them work it out on their own, if possible.
- Act as a go-between only if the conflict becomes physical or extreme.
- Separate children until they are calm enough to talk about the problem.
- Let your children know that you are aware of their individual qualities and successes.
- Do not compare one child with another. That only makes the rivalry worse.
- Avoid taking sides. Be aware of each child's feelings and needs.
- Identify the problem and discuss possible solutions with them. "You are both very angry. I see two boys and only one truck, but the rule is no hitting people to get what you want. Let's set the timer to take turns with the truck."
- Teach children acceptable ways to express their feelings that do not involve hitting or saying hurtful things.



Sibling rivalry may continue as children grow and develop. Their needs for parental attention, fighting over ownership of something, or trying to be seen as better than the other in some way do not go away at a magical age. Parents need to reassure each child of his or her special character and importance to the family. Parents should try to spend time alone with each child regularly and have special, yet different, activities that they do with each child to make him or her feel valued as an individual.

*For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.*