

Did Not, Did Too!

What to Do When Your Kids Fight

By Cindy Hampel-Litwinowicz

Cain and Abel. Cinderella and her stepsisters. Lisa and Bart.

Put siblings together long enough and you'll have rivalry. It's universal and inevitable, according to William Irving, a St. Clair Shores psychologist affiliated with St. John Hospital in Detroit. "There will always be some amount of tension between kids," he said. "Because like the old saying, 'familiarity breeds contempt.'"

And who are kids more familiar with than their own brothers and sisters? However, it can be difficult for parents to remain philosophical about sibling rivalry when it's their own children fighting for attention.

As psychologist Tracey Stulberg, director of the Birmingham Family Clinic explained it, "It's easy for siblings to combat each other because they know their brothers and sisters will still be around after the fight is finished. We definitely take advantage of people we always think will be there."

But Lauri Berkenkamp and Steven Atkins, authors of *Because I Said So: Family Squabbles and How to Handle Them*, offer an even simpler reason for rivalry, "Kids bicker because they can. They do it when they're bored, tired, irritable or just because it's their right as siblings!"

Sibling rivalry comes in all degrees — from mild to moderate to in-need-of-professional help. It tends to be more intense in families where the children are the same gender or closer in age, and psychologists see it even more frequently in blended families. "With half- and step-siblings," said Irving, "Sibling rivalry is even more of a problem. Stepparents need to be vigilant; they can't cure sibling rivalry, but they can manage it."

If you're on the front lines with your troops constantly locked in one battle or another, consider these suggestions to find some peace:

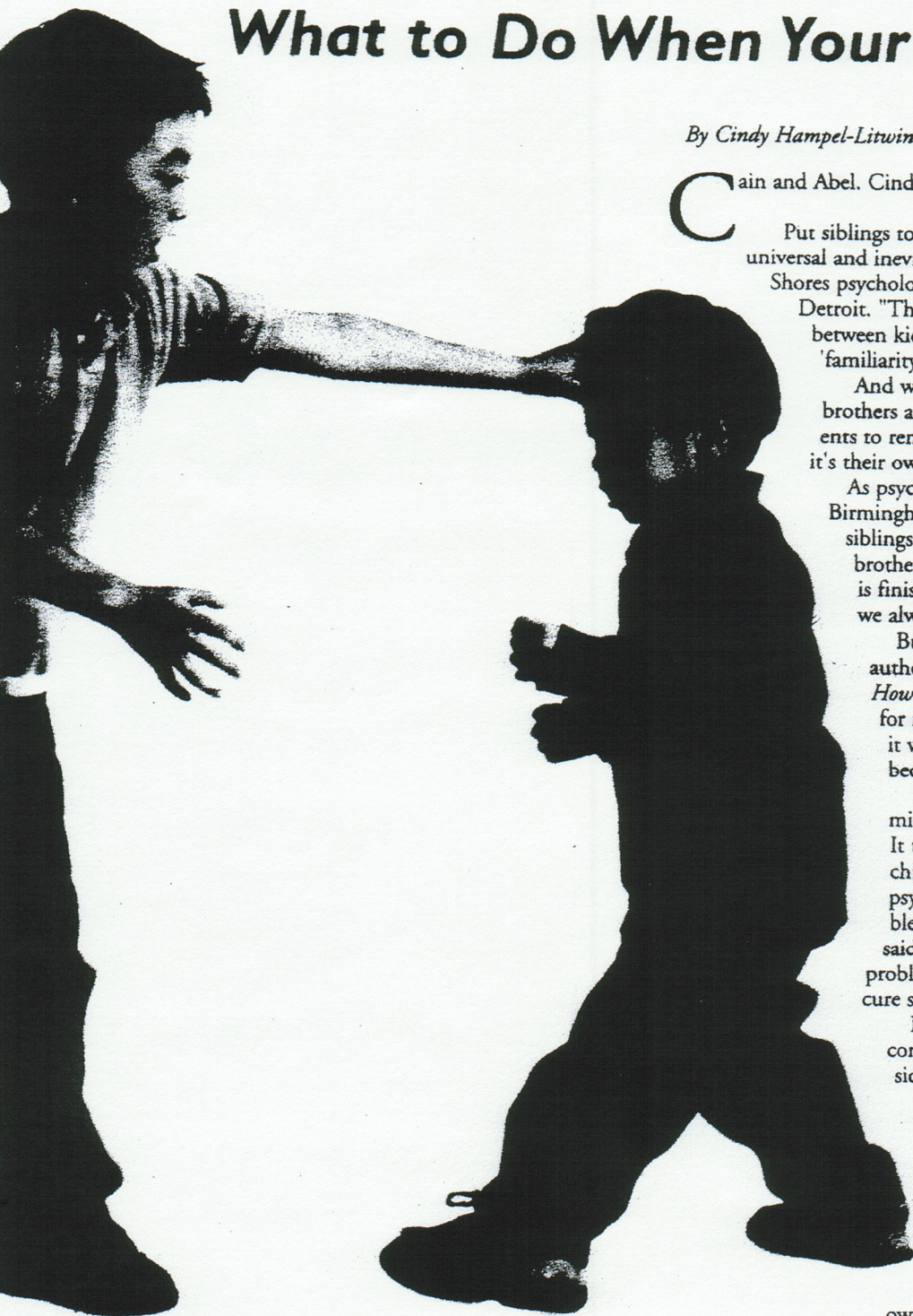
1. Be a good example.

"Adults who treat each other with love, honor and respect are the best doses of preventive medicine," said Stulberg.

"Whether their parents are married, divorced or remarried, children who see them respect and back-up each other will more likely mirror that behavior in their own relationships. The exception is if there is a

threat to the physical or emotional safety of any of those involved."

She added that if parents disagree, they should talk about the issue together out of kids' earshot. They



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shouldn't compete for their children's affection in order to be "right" or "the good parent." And if parents make a mistake, they should admit it to the family. This teaches kids that it's okay to make mistakes and rectify them.

2. Don't compare your children.

"Don't start sentences with 'Why can't you...?' Parents also should avoid sentences like, 'Your sister could ride her bike when she was 5 and you're already 7,'" cautioned Irving.

Stulberg added, "Every child is unique with special gifts and cannot be compared to anyone else. Have individual goals for each of your kids depending on his or her abilities and needs. The important message for your children is that you expect them to do the best they can, not the same as everybody else."

3. Teach your kids that fair doesn't mean equal.

"At any given moment, one child will need more attention than the other and you will never be able to give exactly to each at exactly the same time," Stulberg said. Irving pointed out that gifted children, or those with attention deficit disorders or special needs, may get more attention at times because they are the "squeaky wheels" of the family.

Both recommended that parents talk regularly with siblings about fairness, acknowledge their natural resentments and angry feelings, and also give them extra one-on-one attention.

4. Handle issues tactfully.

"Mom thinks you're unreliable" is one example of what can happen when parents discipline one child in front of a sibling. Stulberg suggested talking to the misbehaving child privately, out of earshot of the siblings. Otherwise, the criticism will give other siblings something negative to say about the child.

"At home, you can find a private area to talk. In public, you may need to separate the child from the others for a private time-out, perhaps outside or in a foyer. If you can't do that, then say, 'You and I know that was a really big issue and we will talk about this at home.'

5. Don't give siblings the power to punish each other.

"If one child is treated more like an adult than another, this child may think he has the right to punish the other siblings," explained Stulberg. "This can be difficult if you allow one child to baby-sit the others. Some kids can compartmentalize that they are in charge when baby-sitting, but not when a parent is around. It helps if parents pay the baby-sitter. Then, if kids still think they have the right to discipline even after they're done

baby-sitting, thank them for trying to help but say, 'That's my job now. If you can't handle it, we'll find someone else to baby-sit.'"

6. Let kids work out their own problems whenever possible.

Berkenkamp and Atkins advise in their book, that parents may need to arbitrate at the beginning. Give kids guidelines (no hitting or name-calling) and a time limit for resolving the issue on their own, but otherwise, stay out of their squabbles. Follow through with a consequence if they don't work things

When you step in, no matter how diplomatic you try to be, you're bound to be perceived as playing favorites."

7. Keep a sense of humor.

Irving remembered a line from comedian Bill Cosby, who said, "I learned my parents weren't interested in justice — just peace and quiet." Berkenkamp and Atkins agreed that a light-hearted approach can be effective when kids are fighting, especially in the car.

"If you and your partner are in the car together and your kids' bickering is more than you can stand, pull over and start kissing," they recommend. "It will stop any other activity in the car, guaranteed. Your kids will be so grossed out they'll promise anything not to see it again." ■

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Sibling rivalry-definition

Siblings refer to children who in some way are related by blood or marriage, and who live in the same family. Rivalry between siblings has existed since biblical times. Many of you may remember the story of twins Jacob (youngest, scholar, mother's favorite) and Essau (oldest, hairy, hunter) and how mother helped Jacob steal Essau's birthright by dressing hairy and approaching father, Issac who was blind, with a fresh kill in order to receive the birthright.

We also see examples of it in fairy tales such as Cinderella, where there was horrible rivalry between the step-siblings.

In both of these examples there was not only poor behavior between the children but, as in many cases of rivalry, added actions from the adults that helped to exacerbate the problem. I'm sure most of you heard the saying "you can choose your friends but you can't choose your relatives"? That's very true. Our hope is that our babies grow up and learn to really like one another and choose each others company as a friend. In order for that to happen we have to minimize the anguish that some of these children and you feel when your babies battle. We're going to talk about certain factors that can't be helped in terms of rivalry and some do's and don't that you as a parent can control.

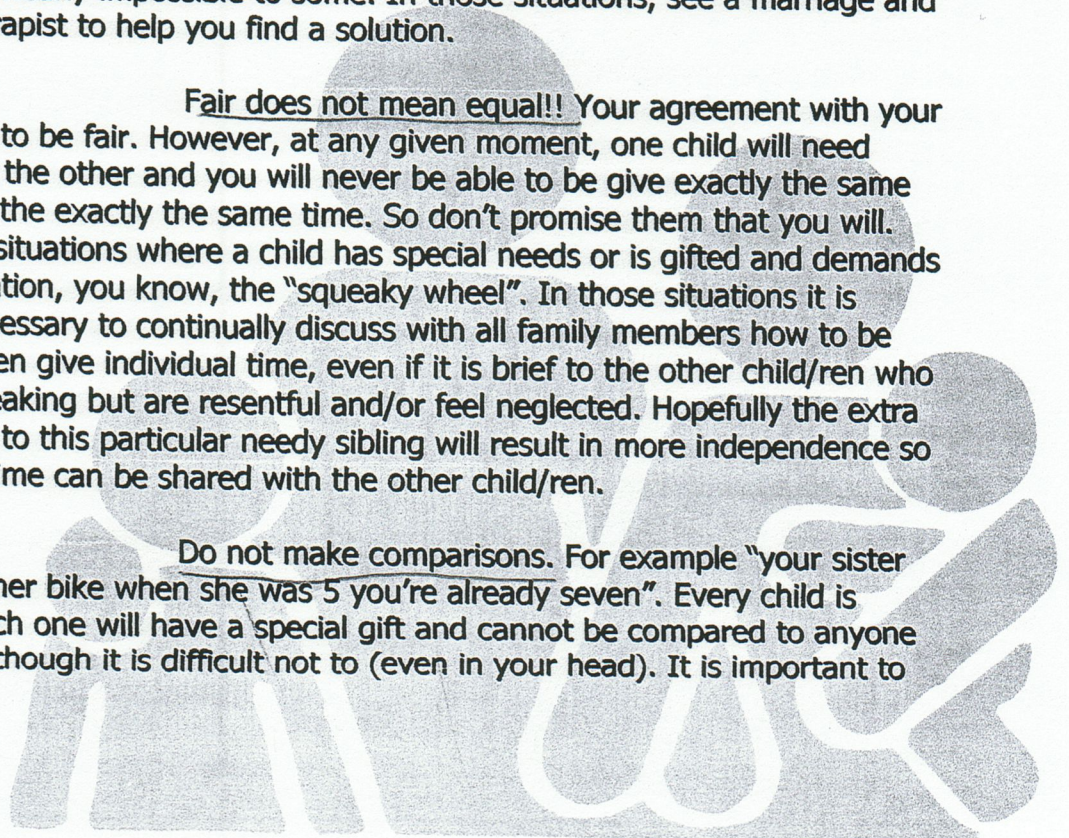
FACTORS

Some of the factors that you really can't control are things like birthorder. Who comes first, whether female or male, their temperament, and their talents and special needs are not under your control. How about the time that you desperately need to use the bathroom and must ask your oldest child to watch a younger sibling for a brief period of time. At that very moment you don't have the time to go into a dissertation about the responsibility of watching a younger child with respect and not over powering them or explain to the younger child that their older sibling is not their "boss", just a little older and trying to help in this way just as the younger one helps in other ways.

So what as parents can we control?

We can control our attitude, display of emotions and behavior so that we don't help add to the problem.

1. Be a great example. Adults who treat each other with love, honor, and respect are the best doses of preventative medicine. When children see their parents whether married, divorced, and/or re-married treat one another with respect and not try to compete with one another for affection, we have a better opportunity to have our children mirror that behavior. Our babies don't do hipocracy. You respect and back up your partner or ex-partner unless there is a threat to physical or emotional safety. You disagree with a particular parenting issue (handling a food issue for example) by taking a time out and discussing it as a team out of earshot. This doesn't mean that you don't compete out on the tennis court, it means that you don't compete for your children's affections in order to be "right" or the "good one". I realize that in many situations between especially between ex-partners or in troubled marriages, that backing up the other parent is difficult or nearly impossible to some. In those situations, see a marriage and family therapist to help you find a solution.
2. Fair does not mean equal!! Your agreement with your children is to be fair. However, at any given moment, one child will need more than the other and you will never be able to be give exactly the same to each at the exactly the same time. So don't promise them that you will. There are situations where a child has special needs or is gifted and demands more attention, you know, the "squeaky wheel". In those situations it is always necessary to continually discuss with all family members how to be fair and then give individual time, even if it is brief to the other child/ren who aren't squeaking but are resentful and/or feel neglected. Hopefully the extra time given to this particular needy sibling will result in more independence so that your time can be shared with the other child/ren.
3. Do not make comparisons. For example "your sister could ride her bike when she was 5 you're already seven". Every child is unique. Each one will have a special gift and cannot be compared to anyone else, even though it is difficult not to (even in your head). It is important to

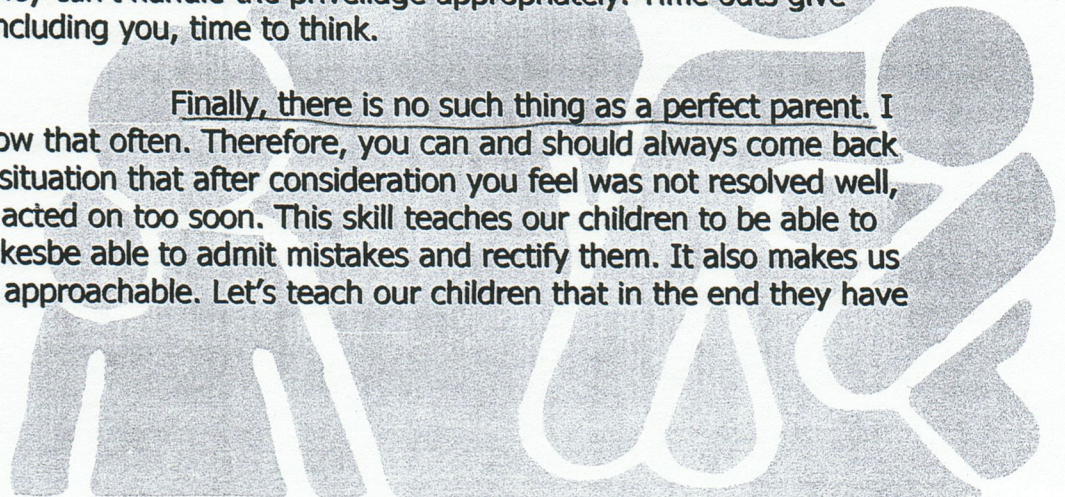


have individual goals for each child depending on their abilities and needs with the overlying message "everyone is expected to do the best that they can do", not the same as everyone else.

4. Always discuss resentments or angry feelings. Dismissing them ("you shouldn't feel that way") is a sure fire way for them to continue. Anger and resentment are normal too. It is important for them to know that you get angry. The important lesson is how you control it or act on it. If you are yelling and berating, the children will do the same to one another. When the babies are angry, sit down and acknowledge and affirm the feeling "I understand and I would probably be angry too". Now is there a way to fix it or do they just need you to listen? Helping them act effectively will go a long way to avoiding hurting one another or the guilt that they are likely to feel when they act out, hurt their sibling and get in trouble for it.

5. Whenever possible, let the children work out their differences on their own. Learning problem resolution is a powerful, invaluable tool that they will use forever. This becomes a bit tricky. How do you know when to intervene? My own policy is zero tolerance for cruelty. If any child is cruel like hitting below the belt (you can't even run right), physically or emotionally abusive (putting their hands on one another, threatening, or intimidating ie. If you don't do this...) there is zero tolerance and immediate action. The kids are separated and the issue is discussed in detail including "what could you have done differently" and a reprocussion (apology, if something was destroyed it is remade or rebought, or a privelidge is taken away). In other situations where they seem to be bickering about nothing it is often helpful to ask "can y'all handle it yourselves or do you need some time away from one another" This includes not being allowed to speak to one another if they can't handle the privelidge appropriately. Time outs give everyone, including you, time to think.

6. Finally, there is no such thing as a perfect parent. I let mine know that often. Therefore, you can and should always come back and redo a situation that after consideration you feel was not resolved well, or that you acted on too soon. This skill teaches our children to be able to admit mistakes be able to admit mistakes and rectify them. It also makes us human and approachable. Let's teach our children that in the end they have



each other to depend on and hopefully through your great parenting they will choose to be friends as adults.

Remember when things seem impossible to fix ASK FOR HELP FROM A LICENSED MFT.

