



## SETTLING SIBLING SPATS

THEY'RE BUDDIES ONE MINUTE, BRAWLING THE NEXT. LEARN TO REFEREE WHILE HELPING SIBS RESOLVE THEIR OWN BATTLES

BY CARA BIRNBAUM

**THE SHRIEKS COMING FROM** the playroom a few nights ago were grab-the-ice-pack loud. Thankfully, I found no blood when I arrived on the scene. Just tubes of glitter and glue littering the rug after an angry tug-of-war. I wanted to back away slowly and let the wee ones duke it out while I finished cooking dinner. Alas, I knew that June, 6, and Lyle, 3, who play and spar with equal gusto, are about as good at conflict resolution as they are at vacuuming.

What can I expect? Sibling relationships are fraught—particularly when they're young; living under one roof is challenging if personalities don't mesh well. And even if they do, sibs are in constant competition for resources, whether it's toys, a coveted spot on the couch, or parental attention. What's more, the parts of their brain responsible for rational reasoning are still a work in progress, leaving them more vulnerable to emotional outbursts. These spats

are brutal on us adults, "whose deepest wish is that our children will get along well, that they'll have a friend forever," says child psychologist Eileen Kennedy-Moore, Ph.D., author of *What About Me?: 12 Ways to Get Your Parents' Attention (Without Hitting Your Sister)*.

If my kids' fights seemed mean-spirited or cruel, I'd have cause for worry, says Dr. Kennedy-Moore. "No child should have to grow up afraid of being seriously hurt, ridiculed, or routinely ganged up on by siblings." (Those kids who do live with a bullying sibling are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, and other long-term issues.) As for minor squabbles, "young kids typically get over them quickly," she says. "I've never had a client confide, 'I feel bad about myself, because my brother called me a 'doody face' a few times.'"

In fact, with adult guidance, these battles provide a safe space for kids to test-drive conflict-resolution skills, notes



Jeffrey Kluger, author of *The Sibling Effect: What the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us*. "You learn when it's wise to stand up for yourself and when to back down, while knowing no matter how much you fight with your brother, you'll still be sharing a room that night."

For parents, the operative word is *guidance*: less steamrolling over conflicts—

which makes kids feel unheard and helpless—and more helping them express themselves and listen to one another's needs. We asked child-development gurus for tips on how to help kids through some of the trickiest sibling flashpoints.

**"I had it first!"**

When the model airplane no one cared about an hour ago launches World War III,

it's tempting to bark out the parenting standby: Share it or lose it! But researchers have found that simply snatching away the prized toy without helping your children work through the conflict undermines kids' diplomacy skills—and turns you into the bad guy.

Instead, start with an impartial observation that makes each child feel heard, understood, and part of one

team, says clinical psychologist Laura Markham, Ph.D., author of *Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life* (out in May). One to try: "I see two kids here and one airplane. Can we figure this out together?"

If you're met with an angry chorus of, "It's my turn," taking the plane may very well be your best path to détente—provided you play coach, rather than drill sergeant. Calmly suggesting, "Let's put the plane on this shelf while we talk," and leading them to another room frees them up to problem solve. Perhaps they'll morph into a pilot-air traffic controller team—or you can nudge your older one to show your youngest how the propellers work. "The more kids are allowed to come up with their own solutions, the more invested they feel in their success," says Dr. Kennedy-Moore.

What if the sibling who rightfully had the toy first refuses to cede any ground? Growing numbers of child development experts say

**WHEN SIBS COME TO BLOWS**

Nearly all kids fight physically from time to time; strong emotions make it hard for them to talk things out. How to deal:

**1. Set the rule**  
Establish a house edict: "Hurting your sibling is not okay." Lay out consequences for breaking the pact ahead of time (and follow through on them) while presenting your kids with alternatives to lashing out, like using "I feel..." sentences to vent their frustrations.

**2. Be a buffer**  
If you actually catch sibs hitting each other, get between them to protect each child. Cool everyone down with a deep breath, then gently touch both kids to make them feel more connected to you and to each other.

**3. Don't banish the aggressor**  
"Defuse the conflict by acknowledging that both kids are part of the equation and responsible for resolving it," says Samantha Kurtzman-Counter, president of The Mother Company. Let both kids take turns explaining what happened and echo back their words.

**4. Help kids make amends**  
Letting the aggressor make up for his behavior helps kids move forward, says Dr. Kennedy-Moore. The amends might take the form of tackling a chore for the wronged sibling or just doing a kindness, like reading a story with him.

**5. Follow up**  
The best time to confront the kid who initiated the battle is after it's blown over, says Abbie Schiller, founder of The Mother Company. "Have a snuggle and let your child know that you were concerned about his behavior and that you expect different things from him."

forcing him to share it interrupts his valuable play—and is just plain unfair. (How would you feel if someone ordered you to stop playing Candy Crush after five minutes and let your neighbor have a turn?) Instead, you might ask: “Jacob, your sister would like to play with it—how long do you think you’ll use it?” suggests Dr. Markham.

She recommends not allowing turns to last more than a day, but in your house, the timeframe might be more like a few hours, or even an hour. Limiting one sib’s turn to any less than that—and setting a timer to make that child

turn over a toy—means you’re essentially ordering him to share and teaching his sister that she’d better enjoy her turn, because she’ll probably have to give it up soon.

While little sis is waiting, you might propose she build a runway with blocks. Dr. Markham swears, more often than not, your kid will tire of his plane and pass it along before his self-imposed turn is up.

**“Mommy gave you more ice cream!”**

See also: “It’s my turn with Daddy!” and “She always helps you first!” Fighting for parents’ attention—

exhausting and unwinnable as it is for you—is actually a hard-wired survival instinct, says Dr. Markham. “Every child looks at his sibling and unconsciously wonders: If there’s a famine, who gets the food? If a tiger jumps out from behind a bush, who will she save?”

Reassuring kids that Mama Bear’s got their backs doesn’t mean treating them equally all the time. Instead, acknowledge how hard your big one’s math problem looks and tell her you’ll be all hers the second you’re done reading to her sister.

Better yet, try heading off *what-about-me* squabbles with “preventative mainte-

nance,” Dr. Markham says. “Spend one-on-one time with each child every day, even if it’s just 10 minutes.” That means putting away the phone and observing the colors he’s used in his drawing; it will send the message that whatever your kid is doing is important to you. Notes Dr. Markham: “When each child can count on that special time, they’re much less jealous when you give attention to the other.”

**“Leave me alone!”**

They’ve got a whole house to play in, so why are your kids brawling over who gets dibs on the couch when there’s a comfy chair a foot

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away? Neither wants to give up turf, says Dr. Kennedy-Moore, and flaring tempers shift brain activity from rational regions into the emotional ones. That's why you'll rarely hear your warring parties announce, "We need some space."

Setting house rules about community areas is a must, say moms Abbie Schiller and Samantha Kurtzman-Counter. (Their latest Mother Company project gives sibs tools to resolve conflicts; see the box below.) "Kids need to know that things like couches are shared—no one is allowed to claim them as their own," says Schiller. "If sharing communal spaces can't happen, then no one stays there."

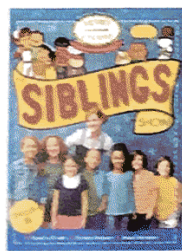
At the same time, don't make them share everything. "We all need private zones where we don't have to interact," says Dr. Markham. The more you can map out those spots for siblings before battles break out, the better. While Schiller's kids share a room, for example, the house rule is that each child's bed is their sacred spot. "Having things that belong to them alone is soothing for kids," she says.

### "There's nothing to do, and he's bothering me!"

We don't know your kids, but are they in the back seat of the car right now? Stuck inside on a rainy day? Or tagging along on your coffee date with a friend? When they're cooped up and bored, sibs might start a fight to get attention from one another or to drag you from whatever you're doing.

The good news: Anticipating these fights is easy once you learn to spot the root causes. You know, for example, that if your kids stayed up late the night before, they're cranky and a blow-up could be imminent. Schiller suggests heading it off by saying, "You guys didn't get enough sleep. If you start to feel grumpy with each other, use your words." You might even plan ahead to separate them, setting up a playdate for one sib and taking the other to the park.

If boredom threatens to make them snap, set out activities each child can do alone, like watercolors or play dough. Distract them with an impromptu dance party. Or turn battle cries into a hilarious, nonsensical song—they'll be too busy wondering, *What's with Mom?* to keep sparring. ■

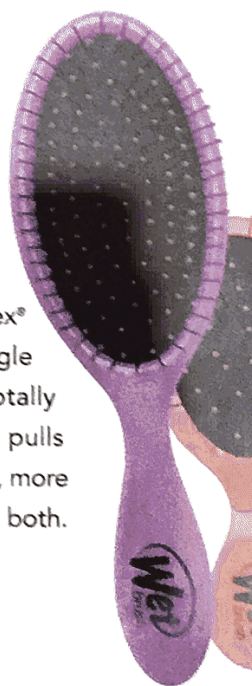


#### HELP SIBS FIND THE LOVE!

The Mother Company's engaging new video, *Ruby's Studio: The Siblings Show*, teaches kids how to resolve arguments, deal with jealousy, and avoid physical fighting—all while having fun! You can buy the DVD (\$15) or download the program (\$12) at [Themotheco.com](http://Themotheco.com) starting April 10.



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