

10 Ideas: Overcoming Sibling Rivalry

As we raised our six children, Barbara and I had many opportunities to train them to get along with each other.

by [Dennis Rainey](#)

Sibling rivalry has been described as a shoot-out between Siamese twins. When your children are in conflict, it's not fun to watch them take out their hurts and anger on one another. As Barbara and I watched our six children struggle through hundreds of squabbles, conflicts, disputes, and divisions, we would wonder, *Are we being successful as parents? Is there something we're doing wrong? Are we raising a group of juvenile delinquents?*

The truth is that conflict is common to all interpersonal relationships, and every parent knows that it's especially true between siblings. Children are going to struggle with one another, compete with one another, irritate one another, and have conflict. As parents we came to the conclusion that if we are going to have to endure these conflicts, we would turn them into training opportunities. As a result we repeatedly taught our children to honor one another, to begin to speak well of one another, and to resolve disputes as they occur.

In the process, Barbara and I learned a few lessons that we have shared with our *FamilyLife Today* listening audience and now with you. If you are like we were in this phase of parenting, you can use every shred of help you can get!

1. Model honor and respect as you relate to one another in your marriage, and as you relate to your children. You can't expect your children to honor one another if you don't first relate with honor and respect in your marriage.

This doesn't mean you won't argue with each other on occasion. There were times when Barbara and I were embroiled in a disagreement and we stopped and said to our brood of witnesses, "Children, your mom and dad love and respect one another. We just have a differing opinion on a matter right now." That would help us settle down and it also assured them that we loved, honored, and respected one another. In some cases we postponed the remainder of our "conversation" until later after the children were in bed.

2. Recognize the three kinds of sibling rivalry. The lion's share of how children argue with one another generally falls into three categories of how they seek to hurt one another: *Verbal* (using words), *physical* (using physical pain), and *relational* (using relationships). As parents, you need to have a game plan on how you're going to handle each of these three categories.

3. Train them to ask for forgiveness when they offend or offer forgiveness when they're hurt. The Bible talks about bringing the fruits of repentance as we seek to reconcile with a brother. While you can't force children to be repentant, you can train them in the mechanics of asking for forgiveness, and you can appeal to their heart to seek forgiveness. And you also need to train them to grant forgiveness when the other person comes asking for it.

4. Be in agreement as a couple on your boundaries and penalties when there is sibling rivalry. Barbara and I used the passage from [Proverbs 6:17-19](#) that talks about seven things the Lord hates. Those became a framework from which we designed our system for penalizing our children for many of their conflicts. There are certain things that can't be allowed to go unaddressed: lying, hitting, biting, and name calling, for example, were not acceptable in our family. As your children move into the teenage years, you will need a mutually agreed upon game plan to change the penalties as they get older.

It's also helpful to have children memorize passages of Scripture in response to acts of sibling rivalry. Romans 12:14-18 talks about being at peace with all men. Assign them Scriptures that speak of how we should treat one another, and see how God's Word begins to work its own way into their soul.

5. Listen to both sides before coming to a judgment. I can't tell you how many times I have almost disciplined the wrong child, or learned that the child who got caught in a fight was not the original perpetrator. Often there is a catalytic reaction for an incident, and you have to do some detective work to determine who is at fault. If after investigating you can't determine who's at fault, ask God to help you catch the offending child in the future.

6. Give your children alternatives. "Either work this out or you both will have the privilege of an extra chore." If you can't determine who is at fault in an incident, and both seem to be guilty (which is the case many times), there's nothing quite like a good healthy chore to help children get hold of their emotions and find a way to settle their disagreement. We used to have a box that had slips of paper with extra "nasty" chores ... washing windows, cleaning bathtubs and bathrooms, mopping the kitchen, etc. (We found out many years later that our children raided the chore box and removed the nastiest ones!)

7. Don't expect your children to be conflict-free. They are different, and they will disagree and compete with one another. Competition, disagreement, conflict, and division have been around since the beginning of time. Remember: Conflict provides training and teaching opportunities.

8. When appropriate, let natural consequences occur. Moms, this is especially directed to you. You may have to put your heart on the shelf and let the children argue for awhile. Don't rush in and rescue your children from conflict. Sometimes children are just using conflict to get your attention. Sometimes, just letting them argue and work things out is the best thing. You will wear yourself out if you become a relational referee, trying to resolve every dispute fairly.

9. Pray that you'll catch them when they do wrong. Whenever our children repeatedly had money or clothing or objects that disappeared and never showed up, we realized one of the children was stealing from the others. Barbara and I began praying that we would catch the one doing it. Not long after praying, we found hard evidence of the thief and took appropriate action.

Our prayers were answered in different ways over the years. On one occasion, we knew one of our children had stolen a brother's 1942D penny. We knew who did it, and so we began to pray out loud over the child as we put the child to bed at night. "God, you know this child has done this. I pray that you'll help us catch him." The conviction of God's spirit came on that child and soon the "prodigal" penny was found.

10. Ignore most of it. This is a challenge because conflicts between children can be so disappointing. Practice ignoring non-life threatening conflict for a week.

Our two boys used to wrestle so that the light in the kitchen which is right below their room used to bounce. We were afraid that those two guys would grow up to be enemies. Instead they are incredible friends. So my encouragement to you is to realize that your children will outgrow it.

How have you dealt with sibling rivalry in your family? I'd be interested to hear some of the lessons you have learned; just leave a comment at the end of this article. And remember the words of Galatians 6:9, "Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary."