

## Growing Concerns

A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson

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Question: We have three young children (4, 6 and 7) who are bright, healthy and well-behaved much of the time. But when they're in the same room together at home they seem to argue or even get into fistfights all the time. We have to run into the room and intervene every few minutes, but then the fighting starts right up again. What can we do to stop the wars?

Answer: Sibling squabbles are among the most annoying things for parents to endure. And they can be dangerous, especially for the younger or smaller children in the family. But such conflict is not surprising if we think about it from the child's point of view. Within the family there is a lot of competition for limited resources: limited toys, limited space, limited adult time and energy. Confronted with limited resources, children feel the urge to fight for what they want. Also, when people of any age live together day in and day out, they do get on each other's nerves. And young children have not yet developed the patience and coping skills that allow them to deal with their negative feelings more constructively. On top of all that, home is a place where most of us let our hair down, expressing our feelings with fewer inhibitions than we do in public, and children are no exception to that rule.

Although irritating, sibling battles present a rich opportunity for helping children learn and practice new social skills and strategies for conflict resolution. You've already discovered that it's not effective to run in to the room to intervene after the battle starts. So it's time for some longterm prevention strategies that, over time, should help your kids learn more positive behaviors:

- At a time when your children are not fighting, engage them in generating a list of rules for "fair fighting" (e.g. use words, not fists, to tell someone you're angry; no swearing or name-calling) and make a poster to help them remember their rules.

- Involve the children in deciding what the consequences will be if someone breaks a rule. Then be sure to follow through consistently the next time things get out of hand.
- Decide together on some preventive strategies to avoid conflict. For example, divide the play space or the toys, or agree to play next to each other but not with each other for a period of time.
- Teach the kids the word "compromise" and help them think of ways they could compromise when they are on the brink of a conflict.
- Let the children see you and your spouse resolve conflicts in a peaceful way. Some parents try to hide disagreements from kids, but children can learn a lot from watching adults handle resolve simple conflicts. For example, let them see you each state your feelings and needs; generate possible solutions; then decide together what you will try.
- Be cautious about what the children are watching on TV. If they do see a show with a lot of conflict, talk with them about what they're seeing and how it could have been handled better.
- When conflict does break out, let the children work on it themselves as long as they are within the rules they've developed with you. If they start to slip, step in as "coach" to remind them of the ideas they've come up with before. Remember that they will learn best by doing, And the skills they learn with each other will serve them well in relationships for years to come.

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