



TERM 06 TOPIC

Parents Newsletter

Marijana Filipovic-Carter
Family Engagement & Support Lead

HOW TO MANAGE SIBLING RIVALRY DURING THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS

Siblings squabbling, arguing, fighting, annoying each other... It is all normal and developmentally appropriate. Sibling rivalry has its purpose as it helps children learn and practice important social skills. However, often, sibling rivalry can be very irritating for us adults especially during the long 6 weeks of summer holidays. How can we manage it better?

Firstly, we need to understand sibling rivalry. Summer holidays or not, sibling rivalry tends to be more intense for children who are born three and less than three years apart, as well as between same sex siblings. Birth order can also affect your child's behaviour around siblings as children tend to compare themselves with each other. They also tend to position themselves within a family based on these comparisons (If my brother is good at football, will I try and be better or focus on something else? Or give up entirely or be rebellious and revengeful?).

Your children's behaviour will partially depend on which of the above choices they have made. Their temperament and personal characteristics will also play the part here. Siblings' behaviour can be exaggerated during the summer holidays when they spend more unstructured time together. We all thrive on structure, so when that structure is removed, we feel a bit vulnerable. During this time, and while we are getting used to the new routines, some children tend to lash out at their siblings while some prefer their own company and get irritated when their peace is disturbed.

Ways to deal with sibling rivalry during the summer holidays:

Sibling rivalry is 99% of the time a result of the need to fight for parental attention. So, make sure that all your children get enough of 1-1 time with you.

Put your children in the same boat and do not take sides because this reinforces the mistaken belief that they must compete to get your love and attention.

Use reflective listening and problem solving to teach children how to listen to each other and brainstorm for solutions to problems (instead of arguing or asking you to interfere).

When your children are fighting, you can say "Would you both like to go to your time-in spaces until you are ready to stop fighting?" After this cool-off time, try reflective listening and problem solving.



Avoid victim and bully training. If we constantly take sides with one child (usually the youngest) assuming that the oldest is always at fault, we unintentionally label one child as “the victim” and the other as “the bully”. This can cause self-fulfilling prophecy, where children internalise these labels and start to behave accordingly.

Don't compare your children, especially when they can hear you. Avoid saying things like “Why can't you just be like your brother?!” Verbally cherish them for what they are and make sure they all know they are loved for being the unique humans.

Give children a choice: “You can either stop arguing or go outside to argue. If you choose to argue, I don't want to listen to it.” If they don't want to go out, you remove yourself from the situation.

If one of the children is in an imminent danger (for example, one of them is about to throw a rock at another), you need to act. Move quickly to stop the danger (either remove the ‘target’ from the path of the rock or remove the rock from the hands of the child). After that use any of the other approaches described above.

For this to be successful you also need to consider the following:

- Allow children to know that adults argue too. This teaches children that they don't need to panic when there is a conflict because they see that a conflict can be resolved.
- Children need to feel that they can freely express and share thoughts and feelings without anybody trying to improve them or change them. As children learn emotional honesty and vocabulary by watching adults, you need to be prepared to share your own emotional distress but in a calm way, modelling socially acceptable ways of dealing with distress.
- Make sure that you use every opportunity to encourage your children to enjoy each other's company. Look at old photos together, reminisce family holidays, plan family fun, create family rituals, engage them in collaborative play and similar.
- Protect your children's need to spend time alone and apart from each other. You can build this into their summer daily or weekly routine. Children are more likely to be positive about spending time together if they have regular opportunities to fulfil their need for some “alone time”.

As always, being patient and persistent is the key; that means patient with yourself and your children – you are both learning new strategies. Problem solving and conflict resolution described above are advanced skills and they need to be repeated and nurtured for a long time. And you don't have to wait for the summer holidays to start teaching these – you can start right now. The outcome is well worth investing the time – you will not only be able to keep sibling rivalry to a minimum, you'll also be teaching your children life-long skills to apply beyond the summer holidays in future tricky situations inside or outside the family.