

TWO

“Time for a Family Meeting!”

Preparing for Sibling Conflict before It Erupts

Imagine Jennifer and her two boys, ages seven and five, going to shop together at the local mall. For the first 20 minutes, they walk nicely next to their mother and talking about things they see. Both wonderful behaviors. Everything seems to be going smoothly until the seven-year-old says to his younger brother, “I’m walking faster than you,” and the mother’s peace is over.

The five-year-old starts to speed up his walk and gets slightly ahead of the seven-year-old. In response, the older boy increases his speed. The boys are now a good 20 feet ahead and start into a full run. At that moment, and for the first time since they have been at the mall, Jennifer decides to “parent” them. She yells at them to stop, but the race is on! Jennifer runs ahead and grabs them by their arms and yells, “You *never* run away from me!” and adds, “Now there is no ice cream later!” The boys start to loudly protest, and the younger boy starts crying. What a scene! All are angry at each other, and the fun trip doesn’t seem to be so much fun anymore.

This typical scenario illustrates how quickly an activity can spiral out of control. Fortunately, there are four steps you can take to deal with problem behavior effectively *and* prevent it in the first place. No matter the sibling conflict that’s happening in your home (or outside it for that matter), here are the four steps you can take to managing sibling conflict:

1. *Predispute discussion between parents.* The adults (anyone in a parenting role) come up with a parenting plan together that they can implement as a team.
2. *Predispute discussion as a family.* Have a discussion with the children about clear expectations for behaviors to both prevent and manage conflict.
3. *During-dispute actions.* Implement the predispute plan as constructed when fights emerge.
4. *Postdispute discussion.* Have a discussion after conflicts to review what went well and what did not, and to revise the approach for an improved game plan.

This chapter covers steps 1 and 2. It focuses on becoming prepared by having active discussions before disputes erupt about expected behavior from children. It also involves developing a clear game plan. You'll learn various tips for establishing operating rules, coming up with a game plan, preparing for conflict, handling big emotions, following through with rewards and consequences, and more. But before we jump into predispute discussions, let's briefly discuss the difference between parenting bad and good behavior.

Parenting the Good and the Bad

Many, if not most, parents—including me at times, and I do this for a living!—only “parent” when a child misbehaves. Like the mom at the mall in the previous example, most parents don't *parent* until things go awry. When things are good, we tend to let kids be kids. It's not until the yelling starts that we get involved. In other words, we tend to parent the bad behavior. This gives a lot of attention to negative behaviors (which some call “negative attention”).

However, it is more important to pay attention to and praise positive behaviors. *Praise* is a form of positive reinforcement recommended by parenting experts, including me. It often involves giving recognition to the moments when siblings are getting along well. This promotes good behavior, whereas focusing on the negative can actually cause more negative encounters. In the mall example, the boys behaved nicely for 20 minutes, and none of it was acknowledged. There were so many opportunities to praise them. The mother could have said, “I love how you are both holding my hand

and walking with me and talking to each other so nicely!” Giving positive reinforcement makes it more likely that the boys will continue this good behavior.

Another benefit of highlighting the positive is that it provides opportunities to praise all the children involved, which minimizes perceptions of *side taking*. When a parent takes a side—which often unintentionally happens during an attempt to resolve conflict—it can be perceived as favoritism (taken up in depth in Chapter 4), creates resentment and hostility in the child being sided against and serves to perpetuate sibling fighting. In fact, research shows that parents typically side with the younger child by saying things like “You’re older; you should know better” or “You’re older; let your sister have the toy.”

Because children are engaging in positive behaviors with each other, all can be praised for their parts. For example, when a parent observes a brother sharing his toy with his sister, the parent can say, “I love how you shared with your sister.” The parent can also say to the other child, “I love how you said ‘thank you’ when your brother gave you the toy.” Such praise avoids side taking and its many problems.

When we only “parent the bad” it can spiral into a larger issue. For example, a brother and a sister may be playing together for 30 minutes while Dad makes dinner and Mom is trying to finish a big work report that is due the next day. As the siblings play, they share, laugh, give high fives, and give compliments to each other. Neither Dad nor Mom acknowledges their positive behaviors.

But the minute they run into a conflict, the father chooses to parent and yells, “You two, cut that out! You keep it up and there’s going to be trouble!”

The kids yell back at their father, defending themselves by blaming each other.

The father yells back, “Quiet down! Your mother is trying to work!” He then targets the boy, “Be nice to your sister! You should know better!”

At that point, their mother gets up from her work, walks to where her children are and tells them to both go to their separate rooms and she’ll talk to each later. As she leaves the room she shoots her husband a dirty look.

He says, “Why are you mad at me? I tried to get them to quiet down. If you let me just handle it, everything would be sorted out!”

She responded, “You weren’t handling it. You were just yelling. I have to do everything around here! And you know our daughter is usually the cause of these things. Why are you only yelling at our boy?”

What started as a sibling conflict became a marital one. They ended up in this situation because they had few rules and no game plan. We do this in large part because families are generally unprepared for conflict. We are busy people! When sibling conflict erupts, it feels like a nuisance and something our kids shouldn't be doing, at least not as much as they do. So we react reflexively and don't necessarily think through the effect of what we say or do, such as saying, "Be nice to your sister." Many parents assume that their children will automatically know how to behave. This is a mistake. Children act according to their own impulses if they haven't been told the rules. At some point, all young children will yell, "No!" to their parents' undesirable requests until they are taught that there are other, better responses.

That's why the takeaway for this chapter is to have discussions about sibling fighting with your children and your partner *before* you are in the middle of that action. When we do this we emerge with a plan, a set of clear operating rules. The more prepared we are for sibling conflicts, the better able we are to handle them. It's getting caught off guard that results in easy-to-say but unhelpful statements such as "Be nice to your sister."

Preparing your family for inevitable conflicts can be a straightforward process. I've broken down steps 1 and 2 further, so you can create your own game plan with ease and not leave out anything important.

PREDISPUTE DISCUSSION STEPS

Step 1. Predispute discussion between parents. The adults co-construct a game plan.

Step 2. Predispute discussion as a family. The adults and children come together to do the following:

- Establish operating rules
- Teach emotion-regulation skills
- Clarify rewards and consequences
- Create a family contract
- Offer the opportunity to "try again"
- Rehearse

Let's take our first step now!

Step 1: Predispute Discussions between Parents

Many different approaches to parenting sibling fights can work, but only if the parents work together as a team. As you will learn in the next chapter, parental conflict is linked to sibling conflict in research. In fact, conflicts between parents may be the reason for ongoing sibling conflicts in many families.

It's critical for parents to be in agreement. When parents do not parent as a team it is called "split parenting." One parent ignores while the other screams, or one parent always sides with one child while the other parent sides with the sibling, or one parent doles out threats and punishment while the other attempts to understand hurt feelings, tries to distract, or have them problem solve.

Most couples' ideas about how to discipline will differ. It's essentially impossible to approach every situation the same way. These differences often turn into parenting conflicts in which one will accuse the other of doing it wrong. For example: "You're being too soft with them!" in turn is met with "You're being too hard on them!"

Couples frequently compete with each other about the best approach, with each thinking "My way is better." Competition leads couples to become more stubborn in their position and take it to another level. The parent who feels their partner is too soft, for example, will become even more forceful in their approach, which will then make their partner softer, and so on. Eventually the softer parent will protect the children from the more aggressive parent. The harder parent will say, "That's it! I've had enough. You both lose your Nintendo for the month." In response, the softer parent will say (often in front of the children), "That's too long, don't you think?"

The common result is resentment between parents. They begin to dislike each other. "Why are you not on my side?" wonders the harder parent, while the softer parent thinks, "Who is this monster I married?" Both feel alone in their parenting and in the marriage. Perhaps it's not a surprise that couples counseling is a common feature of families that seek treatment for sibling fighting.

When one parent disciplines aggressively and the other parent, feeling it's overly harsh, intervenes to protect the children from his or her partner, it causes more resentment and feelings of powerlessness, which will result in the aggressive parent becoming more aggressive. Why? Because when a parent protects his or her children from a partner, the children learn that they don't have to listen to the aggressive parent. They know the protective

parent has their backs. This dynamic increases parental resentment, parent-child conflict, and sibling fighting.

Of course sibling fighting may not be the cause of a couple's challenges. It may be that a couple's problems are the cause of sibling fighting. It is important to ask yourself, "Do I have a good relationship with my partner?" If the answer is "No," then that is a likely culprit for ongoing sibling discord.

Sometimes it can be difficult to tell if the cause of a couple's conflict is child behavior or other challenges, such as feeling like your partner doesn't appreciate you or is not interested in you. If unsure, even after thoughtful reflection, or the cause is clearly a problem relationship, couples counseling is highly recommended. Following a shared parenting plan can help, but it won't address other relationship issues. A happier partnership means happier children, and happier children are nicer to each other and fight less.

Not everyone who has fighting children has a partner, of course. Single parents frequently have to parent alone. Many single parents, however, rely on other folks to help out with the parenting. Often these are grandparents, their own siblings, or babysitters. The ex-partner may still be active as a coparent. Sometimes it can be the oldest child who is asked to help care for their younger siblings. Relying on others to assist in childcare raises many of the same issues described in this section. For example, a mother who relies on her mother to watch the children so she can work often runs into frustration about her own parent's parenting approach, thinking it is too hard, soft, or perhaps invasive. Misalignment doesn't just occur between spouses, but also between any parenting pair. Getting on the same page is vital. Pre-dispute discussions are necessary.

BECOME ALIGNED PARENTS

Talking with your partner can be difficult. People feel defensive about their parenting approach and often feel attacked when told they are not managing their children well. Here are some tips for discussions that keep you aligned:

- **Remember that sharing is caring.** You probably know this phrase well. It applies to you too. Discussions have to be approached as having a *shared* problem that you need to address together. Individual partners should not be viewed as the problem but as teammates trying to reach the same goal: less sibling fighting. Finding a shared approach often involves openness to feedback, self-reflection, and a willingness to compromise.

- **Create a game plan together.** Trying to parent “on the fly” leads to inconsistent approaches and only giving attention to, or parenting, the bad behaviors. It also leads to frequent couples’ disputes about parenting. So agree to implement a game plan as a team *before* the fighting erupts. This means that both parents can voice their ideas of expected behavior, consequences, and rewards. It provides a format for working together. Feeling like your partner is your teammate, is on your side, and has your back brings couples closer and makes relationships better.

- **Ask each other poignant questions.** To address problems of split parenting, couples must talk about their parenting disagreements and ways they can work together. Some of the discussion can include questions like: How do we intervene consistently? How do we have each other’s back? What’s the plan if we feel like each other is not abiding by the agreement?

- **Clarify rewards and consequences.** This topic is important and is further discussed in the “Predispute Discussions as a Family” section that follows. If the adults can discuss this ahead of time, however, the family meeting will go much more smoothly. Parents should discuss what to do when their children misbehave. This avoids parenting only the bad and with haphazard, “on the fly,” and inconsistent ways.

Step 2: Predispute Discussions as a Family

After getting on the same page with your partner, it is helpful for all family members to have a meeting, or multiple meetings, to go over the game plan. It starts with reviewing expected behaviors and setting rules.

ESTABLISH CLEAR OPERATING RULES

Imagine playing a basketball game where the rules are not known, only learned through trial and error, inconsistently applied, and with each player having different rules, and even more concerning, the referees each calling infractions differently. It would be chaos! There would be a lot of yelling, resentment, and bad behavior. Knowing the rules enables fair play, teamwork, and peace.

It’s the same in families. When children know the rules for how to act—before and when fighting erupts—there will be less need for parents to get involved. Knowing the rules enables children to learn how to problem

solve on their own. Again there is no way to completely prevent conflict from happening. Nor do we want that (although it sounds amazing!)—there's a lot of good that comes from conflict. But with clear operating rules, conflict become less frequent, less severe, and can lead to building stronger bonds.

As you will learn in subsequent chapters, the more parents are involved, the more likely there is to be conflicts and the more dependent children will be on their parents to resolve them. The best outcome is ultimately for parents to only be involved intermittently as reminders of the rules, and in the role of positive reinforcement providers for good behaviors. It is important to make expectations clear for children (note: I use the words “expectations” and “rules” to mean the same thing). Believe it or not, children actually *want* rules and appreciate knowing how to behave. They like knowing the parameters for their behavior. It makes them feel safe.

Which Rules to Start With

Developing rules may feel daunting but they don't have to be identified all at once. A helpful way to start is to recall common sibling fights. What are they usually over? Toys? Screens? Where do they take place? What time of day?

You might easily be able to identify a few common conflicts quickly, such as control over the video game console, who gets to sit in the front seat of the car, who gets the last cookie, or playing with a sibling's toys without asking their permission. Start with up to three common conflicts and think about how you would like your children to act instead of the way they are. Would you like them to alternate their use of the remote? Share their toys? Ask permission before taking a sibling's toy or eating the last cookie?

The ways you would like your children to behave should become the new expectations for behavior. After you have developed rules for three common conflicts, then you can move on to others.

If you're having trouble recalling the repeated conflicts, keep a record of disputes in a notebook. Parents act like researchers to identify patterns of conflict. They record where the conflict happened, the time of day, and what the fight was over. Some common areas for conflict are long car rides, shopping trips, at-home summer days with little structure, and video game playing time. Reviewing this record may identify not only repeating areas of conflict, but also common times of the day. Knowing this information helps to set up rules for that time of day. For example, parents may observe in their notebook that fights often happen right before bedtime, when kids are tired and have little left in their fuel tanks. Knowing this enables parents to

understand this as a problem time of day and set up rules for going to bed (a quick note about transitions in the box in the next section).

One rule that most parents appreciate establishing ahead of time is what to do during an important phone call. For example, you may tell them that during the call they need to be in separate locations doing independent activities to minimize the chances of conflict between them erupting. For young children, you will need to choose these activities as well to avoid the “I don’t know what to play with” interruption during the call. If it’s not possible to have the children in separate locations, review rules you’ve established about how to manage conflict. Remind them of what you expect and what the consequences will be if they are disruptive. If a majorly important call, it helps to also offer a “prize” for good behavior. This way, if the children do cause a disruption, you can simply say to them (covering the phone receiver), “Remember what we talked about? No prize and there will be consequences if this continues. Now go to separate places until I am done.” It is also helpful to give children an idea about how long you will be on the phone, if possible.

There will be conflicts that are not predictable. Note them when they occur so that you can develop new carefully planned rules—in a family discussion—after the conflict is over. While the goal of the predispute discussion is to try to predict conflicts, not all can be anticipated. How to specifically address disputes when they emerge, both anticipated and unanticipated, is taken up later in this chapter.

Involve Children in Rule Setting

If your children are young, spell out the rules for them. If they are older, you can ask them to offer strategies for preventing fights. You can say, “What should the rules be about sharing the remote?” “What is your plan for when you disagree about what show to watch?”

In addition, you can lay out the expectations. “I expect that you will take turns choosing shows.” “There is no grabbing or holding the remote. Once you choose a show, put the remote down, and then when the show is over, the other can use it to put on their choice of show.” And remind children of what to do if they end up bickering. For example, an operating rule might be to walk away to calm down and try again nicely before Mom or Dad has to get involved.

When your children catch themselves and say, “Let’s not fight. Let’s try again to take turns” or things like, “I’m sorry. I should ask to borrow your sweater and just not take it,” praise these moments, and praise them like

crazy! This is how—often during conflicts—children learn *prosocial skills*, the behaviors that make relationships go well.

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Does Conflict Happen at the Same Time Every Day?

It is common for arguments to occur during *transitions*, like coming home from school, getting ready to go to a restaurant, or getting started on homework. Knowing that transitions can raise the possibility for conflict is helpful because parents can be especially prepared for these times. Operating rules can be developed that specifically target problematic transitions.

Additionally, noting the time of day often reveals that children aren't trying to cause conflict; they're just *hungry*. Are your kids susceptible to getting into arguments when they are hungry? Take some time this week to notice. Make sure they're eating when they need to. If fights occur directly when they come home from school, for example, have a snack ready and have them eat it before they go to watch television together.

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Set Realistic Expectations

It is important to note that there is no single ideal set of rules for behavior. Expectations for good behavior are co-constructed by the parents for younger children, and with the children when they are older (over age eight). Different parents have different expectations. For the example of children fighting over a toy, one set of parents' rules may be to "take turns and alternate possession" after a set amount of time, while another set of parents may prefer the rule "whoever was using it first gets to play with it until they are done." Both approaches are effective as long as the rules are clear to everyone and kept consistent.

Parents run into trouble when the rule is applied inconsistently. Even more problematic is if the rules seem to favor one child over the other (a topic we will look at in depth in this book). An example would be if an older brother is instructed to take turns and share but the rule with the younger sister is that the brother has to wait until she is done. These inconsistent

rules favor the daughter. Favoritism, as we will discuss, exacerbates sibling conflict, builds resentment, and makes sibling relationships more negative. Rules must be consistent and fair.

There are of course some expectations that I expect all parents share. My experience is that parents want their children to be kind to each other and avoid trying to intentionally hurt the other emotionally or physically. Being kind involves learning prosocial skills, so be sure to include expectations that develop these traits, such as:

- Perspective taking, trying to understand another's experience by imagining yourself in their situation
- Giving compliments
- Inviting each other to join in activities
- Providing emotional support when the other is hurting
- Sharing
- Verbalizing frustration, rather than showing it physically, which might be helped with a prompt like "Use your words"
- Showing empathy

Many of the behaviors occur naturally, and I highly encourage you to enthusiastically praise these behaviors when they occur. Parent the good!

These good behaviors, however, also need to be taught, especially when siblings are conflictual. When they begin resenting each other, they are less likely to employ prosocial behaviors on their own. This is understandable because when we feel as if someone does not have our best interests in mind, we are less likely to want to show empathy, provide support, share, or invite that person to join in activities. Therefore, it is helpful for predispute conversations to include rules that reflect prosocial behavior. These may include rules like the following:

- Instead of playing with a toy by yourself, invite your sibling to join you.
- If your brother looks sad, ask him what's wrong and tell him you can see that he is sad.
- Ask yourself what it is like for your sister when you play with her toy. What would it be like for you if your sister played with your toys?

No Violence Permitted

This is a no-brainer from the start. It's essential to have a no-violence rule in which behavior aimed to injure the other emotionally or physically is not permitted and comes with serious consequences.

It is quite common for toddlers (and even older children) to try to physically harm a younger sibling very early on, even as newborns. While a three-year-old's punch may seem harmless and even cute, it should not be permitted. However, this is tricky territory because parents have to be careful not to help increase the aggressive child's resentment and negative feelings by simply protecting the baby.

As we discuss in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, much aggression comes from feeling like an outsider in one's own family. In short the newborn has arrived and is getting a lot of attention. The older child experiences a loss in attention and often feels relegated to the secondary spot; they become more of an outsider. So parents must put an immediate stop to aggressive behavior while offering a positive replacement behavior so that the child feels included and not like an outsider.

For example, after a toddler tries to slap an infant, a parent may get down on one knee, look the child firmly in the eyes, and tell the child that hitting is never allowed. Instead, the child can "use their words" and express how they feel, but more importantly, can help Mom and Dad in caretaking, such as helping to feed or change the baby, so they feel more included. They are included as "big brother" or "big sister"—a status that one has an important role and is on the inside of the family and aligned with their parents.

Similarly, name calling is a form of interpersonal violence. It is intended to do harm and opens the door for more serious forms of violence. The "no violence permitted" rule should include name calling. You should be careful to model this, as it is a problematic behavior in all relationships.

Harmful behaviors arise out of frustration and resentment, and children should try replacement behaviors to express themselves, such as sharing hurts or saying when they feel violated. Children need the "good rule," which means that they need the replacement behavior for when they act badly. They can't be told "Don't hit," "Don't throw things at each other," or "Don't say mean things." Saying "don't" does not help them learn what the expected behavior is. If you say "don't" *also* include what "to do." Here are some examples of what to tell your child they *can* do instead:

- Walk away if you're feeling angry or frustrated.
- Find something else to do that you like until you calm down.
- Calmly tell your brother or sister that what happened made you angry.
- Tell me what you're feeling right now. Use your words.
- Ask if your brother or sister can take turns. If they say no, find something else to do and come back later and try again.
- Calmly ask if you can play together.
- Calmly ask that your brother or sister leave you alone for a little while.
- I want to remind you that if you get out the Legos, you will need to put them away before dinnertime.

TEACH EMOTION-REGULATION SKILLS

Children's disputes are typically emotionally charged. There is a lot of yelling, hurt feelings, and anger. Predispute discussions should include talking about emotions and how to handle them productively. Being able to control one's emotions in order to have productive problem-solving interactions is called "emotion regulation"—a skill that often needs to be taught.

For most children, and almost all young children, the predispute discussions need to include strategies to reduce their anger, so they can implement the expectations spelled out in the predispute plan. When people are feeling a lot of anger, it is difficult to be rational and make the better behavioral choice. There are a few strategies that can help and should be implemented when fighting gets highly emotional, including identifying and managing emotional flooding and breathing exercises.

Manage Emotional Flooding

Emotional flooding, or "flooding," refers to the experience of being so hot, angry, or hurt that an individual can no longer listen to others or respond in deliberate ways. The brain gets flooded with emotion and can no longer think rationally. This experience makes people highly reactive, and they engage in responses limited to yelling or shutting down. During intense conflict often one or both parties experience emotional flooding.

The first step is to identify when one is becoming flooded. We have probably all been there. You can feel yourself beginning to boil and about

to lose it. This is the time—before you have lost it—to say, “I am becoming flooded, I have to leave. I will return when I have calmed down and we can resolve this more productively.” The flooded person then leaves and intentionally uses strategies to calm themselves.

It is important that the flooded person does not leave and then replay the conflict over and over, thinking of new ways to “win.” This will only make them more flooded. For children, it is helpful to teach them go-to strategies for calming down. This can include things like playing a musical instrument, going for a walk, painting, reading a book, or texting a friend. After they have calmed down, the child can return to their sibling and say, “I am sorry for yelling. Can we talk about this now?” They are readier to resolve the conflict productively and less likely to say hurtful things that will have to be apologized for later.

Children need to be taught the skill of managing emotional flooding. Even young children can be taught to do this; however they will need assistance in learning ways to resolve the conflict when they are calmer, such as engaging in sharing and taking turns. For older children, nine and up, siblings can learn to talk through the conflict without your intervention, but you can remain present to help redirect when things start to get heated again.

You can calmly ask questions like, “It looks like you are heating up. Are you becoming flooded?” to prompt self-reflection. Teenagers should be able to learn to engage in flooding strategies and independently resolve conflicts. Of course, learning to manage flooding does not happen overnight. It requires practice, and you will often need to help guide your children through the process until they get it.

It is also important to remember that parents also get flooded and cannot be productive in helping to manage conflict when they are emotionally overrun. Saying that you are flooded, stepping away, engaging in calming activities, returning to the conversation when ready, and then resolving it may be necessary for you too. And what a great way to model this skill!

Breathe!

A helpful strategy for reducing flooding and regulating emotions is to engage in breathing exercises. Taking deep breaths when you feel yourself getting angry or hurt can be helpful for slowing down reactions and giving opportunities to talk yourself down. For example, Marvin, age 10, could feel himself getting heated. To help him calm down he first took a few deep breaths.

This prevented him from saying some mean things. It also gave him time to talk to himself. He had been taught to say, “I am getting angry, and that is not helpful. OK, let me listen and then respond in a way that is calm.” He was then able to respond in a way that didn’t escalate the conflict. Children are being taught breathing techniques in some schools, as early as kindergarten—and you can do this too.

When you are flooded and have left the fight to go calm down, a helpful strategy is *square breathing*. This approach involves breathing in a pattern of four seconds in a pattern of four—like a square. It involves breathing in through the nose for four seconds, holding your breath for four seconds, breathing out through the mouth for four seconds, and then holding for four seconds. These are deep breaths (like in the doctor’s examination room). This activates a calming response in the body and enables the emotional flood to recede from the brain and re-enables rational thinking.

Predispute discussions should include the topic of flooding and what the operating rules or expected behaviors are for managing these moments. Rules can include things like the following:

- When flooded, walk away instead of continuing to argue.
- Take deep breaths in a separate location.
- Go play drums when you are so mad you cannot talk.
- After you have calmed down return to your sibling and try to resolve the fight.

Encourage Feeling Words

It is also important to teach “feeling words,” particularly to young children, so that they can express frustration in socially appropriate ways: “I am so frustrated because I can’t _____,” or “She’s being very mean to me and it hurts my feelings!” You don’t have to agree with the statements, but don’t openly disagree.

Allow short venting and say, “OK, I can see that this is very frustrating for you.” After the child has calmed a little, then you can move to “But screaming about it is not going to get you what you want.” Focus on the behavior being inappropriate but the feeling is legitimate. Using a “feeling chart” with faces that show emotions is a helpful way to build a vocabulary.

CLARIFY REWARDS AND CONSEQUENCES

Any conversation of expected behaviors must include a discussion of rewards and consequences. If you have young children, discuss rewards and consequences with your partner first, during your separate predispute discussion, then meet with your children. If you have children over the age of nine, ask them directly what rewards and consequences seem appropriate to them. This may sound strange, but in my many years as a therapist, children always seem to enjoy this conversation. They like being included in the development and selection of rules. It is interesting to note that children typically come up with much more severe consequences than what their parents see as appropriate. When this happens it's helpful to have a conversation about choosing fair consequences. It also makes the parent look benevolent!

A common consequence for younger children is to lose time on an electronic device, television time, or the loss of a favorite toy (such as a stuffed animal or truck). Older children typically select to lose time on their phones. These are effective consequences for most, but some will not care. You will need to consider what is important to the child in choosing consequences. Knowing what is important to your child provides you with leverage. For example, a young teenager I was working with did not seem distressed about losing his phone. When the consequence was changed to not being able to go to weekend parties, however, his behavior immediately changed.

Rewards can be a trickier issue. Many parents feel like a reward is akin to a bribe. They want their children to be motivated to make good decisions internally and not driven by an external reward. But here's the ticket: Positive reinforcement and bribes are not the same. Positive reinforcement, or rewards, are spelled out in advance and are implemented consistently and immediately, whereas bribes are offered during the disruption as a way to get children to stop doing a bad behavior, like fighting. Using positive reinforcement provides an opportunity for your children to choose the expected behavior and for you to provide a reward.

A bribe looks like this: "If you do what you agreed to do and share the television remote, you will earn 10 more minutes on your device." A reward looks like this: "You shared so well! I am proud of you! You have earned 10 more minutes on your device." The latter example feels good for both parents and children. The experience is, well . . . positive . . . for everyone!

Knowing in advance what the rewards and consequences are enables, empowers, and teaches your children to make good decisions on their own. You can remind your children, "You have a choice. As we discussed you

can either do what we agreed to and take turns playing with the trucks, and earn time playing your favorite video game, *or* you don't do what we discussed and don't take turns and have your favorite stuffed animal taken out of your room."

Children almost always choose the good behavior, and they feel empowered by this. Whether your children do or don't engage in the new rule, you must follow through on the reward or consequence. You must do so immediately after your child's behavior.

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Consequences versus Punishment

It is important to briefly note the difference between consequences and punishment. *Consequences* are spelled out in advance. They also usually include a discussion of the expected behavior. This provides children with the choice about whether to engage in the bad behavior that will result in the consequence. And if children do receive a consequence because they were warned in advance, they have a chance to learn from their mistakes.

On the other hand *punishments* are decided and implemented at the moment they occur. Children typically don't have advanced knowledge of what's to come. Punishments are also not usually tied to the bad behavior in an explicit way, making it hard for children to learn what to do instead. For example, a child shoves their sibling and the parent responds by saying, "That's it! No more video games today!" The child has not learned to express themselves in a more productive way than shoving. Research has shown that punishment is not overly effective and requires increasing the severity over time, and it produces sneaky behavior. Punishments end with everyone feeling bad.

In comparison, with a consequence, if your child shoves their sibling, you can say, "Remember what we discussed? You are not allowed to push your brother. You can tell him you are frustrated with his behavior and ask him to stop in a nice way. If that doesn't work, you can come to me. But you cannot push." Your child then has a choice between behaviors: shoving and receiving the consequence or expressing himself and getting rewarded. Consequences allow for child-lead choices so that bad moments can be turned into good ones.

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Tangible rewards, like more device time or getting ice cream, are highly beneficial at the start of a new parenting plan for sibling fighting. After children have engaged in the good behavior on multiple occasions, and it looks as though they have internalized it, rewards can shift to complimenting and praise. Children will experience the additional positive reinforcement of less conflict and taking pride in their own decisions.

A word of caution: You should not use your emotions as rewards or consequences. We often have high expectations that children will do what we say. It is easy to get irritated by ongoing sibling fighting, as it is so disruptive to getting things done and peace in the household. This is especially true when we are hungry or tired, or both. Therefore it may be tempting to withhold affection or use the silent treatment when our children have violated our expectations.

Be careful, however, not to punish your children with negative emotions. Children need to feel that you love them unconditionally, in order to feel safe. If love becomes a condition that is withdrawn due to misbehavior, your children are more likely to become more anxious and angry, which will lead to more sibling fighting. And they will learn to retract love as expressions of frustration in their own relationships. Kids are always learning from their relational experiences.

CREATE A FAMILY CONTRACT

It is important to write down the newly agreed-upon rules for behavior and post them somewhere (such as on a refrigerator) for easy “go to” reference. I encourage writing them down as a contract, as it formalizes the rules and makes them “real.” Leaving the family meeting with only spoken rules allows for different memories of the agreement to arise later. It’s easy for a child to say, “That’s not what you said!” or “I forgot!” when the agreement is only verbal. Equally important, it helps you remember the positive agreed-upon behavior that informs how they approach active sibling conflict. During a dispute your children can be called to the posted rules and you can calmly remind them of the rules.

Here’s how this might play out: Two siblings run to the car and aggressively shove each other to get into the seat. Their father firmly but calmly calls them back into the house. He takes out the written agreement.

“Look at what we agreed to,” he reminds them. “You each said you would alternate sitting in the front seat of the car. You just raced to the front door and pushed each other, which is unacceptable. You both agreed that if

you did that, you would lose 15 minutes of playing video games. Our agreement was also that if you successfully alternated without fighting, you would each get an extra five minutes of video game time. Would you like to lose the 15 minutes or earn the five? It's your choice. Would you like to do what was agreed upon and resume alternating? If so we can try again."

Note how the father remained calm, redirected them to come back into the house so they could review the written rules together. While he could have done it in the driveway, there is something powerful about calling them back into the house and looking at the document together. (If the ongoing sibling fighting occurs out of the home, keep the document in the car or in a wallet or purse.) He then reminded them of the new rule and of the discussed reward and consequence. He then gave them a choice. Giving them the choice returns the responsibility of following the rules to the children, rather than it being the job of the parent, and empowers them to learn how to make good choices.

The father then offered them the opportunity to "try again." This is an important part of the predispute discussion process that enables children to practice doing the new prosocial behavior and gives the parent the opportunity to positively reinforce it.

OFFER THE OPPORTUNITY TO "TRY AGAIN"

"Try again" is my favorite parenting expression for problem behavior or negative sibling interactions. It is an incredibly important strategy. When you offer the opportunity to try again, as the father did with his children fighting over the front seat, you give your children the chance to have a "do over." It gives them an opportunity to try out the skills you are teaching them while under your supervision and to have a positive encounter. It also provides opportunities to reward good behaviors, which feels good for everyone.

This is one of the best ways to take a negative experience and turn it into a positive one. For example, you can say, "Now that we have a taking turns rule, let's try it out!" Your children then engage in the same encounter but with the new rule. They get a "do over" before consequences are applied. When they do follow the rule, you should implement the agreed-upon rewards, which should also include praise for the good behavior. If tangible rewards were agreed to, such as a cookie or allowing them to play a gaming device, these should be given. Doing so helps reinforce the good behaviors.

If your children protest trying again and don't seem influenced by the

reward, it is helpful to remind them of the consequences you identified in the predispute discussion for misbehavior. You might say, “OK, well if you don’t want to try it again now, then you won’t be able to play with your dolls. It’s your choice, you can either try it again now and get to play with your dolls, or not try it again and then not be allowed to play with them.” Typically children will choose the better option.

If they continue to protest, follow through with the consequence; don’t continue to remind your children. In other words, avoid getting to the point where you say, “This is the third time I’m telling you what the consequence is. Are you sure?” One reminder is sufficient. Otherwise you “teach” your children that they can protest for a while until they think there will be an actual consequence—and who wants to do *that* dance? Also remember, when selecting rewards, or privileges you will withhold, that the prizes and privileges must be important to the child.

Let’s return to the example of the father with the children who fight about who gets to sit in the front seat. When they try again and do it the expected way, the father gets to interact with them in a positive way—giving the reward and praise. Without trying it again, the consequence has to be implemented, and the children and parent will only experience negativity, frustration, and resentment. The children will have lost time on their video games and be angry with each other. The father will feel frustrated and think to himself, “Why can’t these kids ever do what they are told?” When everyone experiences success and positive rewards, they are happy and happier with each other. Kids (and adults) get caught up in the moment and often need second chances. Trying again allows families to hit the reset button and redo the encounter in a positive way.

REHEARSE

It is not reasonable to expect that children will be able to implement certain behaviors without practice. While it sounds easy on paper, it’s challenging when it happens. This is especially true with emotional flooding. In this case rehearse strategies *before* a fight or rebellious behavior so that your children are not trying to learn them during the middle of a breakdown.

Children, in particular younger children, often don’t know what the newly expected behaviors look like in action until they have seen or done them. They may not understand, for example, what sharing looks like in regard to the TV remote or blocks. A child may assume that sharing the blocks means “I’ll give my sibling two blocks, and I get to play with all the

others.” Then a fight breaks out, and the child with only two blocks yells, “Ryan’s not sharing!” and Ryan yells back, “Yes I am! I gave her two blocks!” To avoid misunderstandings (which are very common in the young brain), take the time to show your children exactly what is expected. In this case you may need to split the blocks evenly to show the rule clearly and avoid misinterpretation of rules.

Toward a Harmonious Family Dynamic

Now you know the secret to minimizing sibling fighting, or any child misbehavior: Remind children of the rules *before* entering that activity. To recap let’s say your children playing together in a room with toys typically ends with fighting. You now know to take preemptive action by reminding them of the rules, rewards, and consequences. You might say, “Now remember what we talked about? The rules are that if one of you is playing with a toy, the other is not allowed to grab and take the toy away. Also, if you want to play with that toy, you have to ask permission first. If your brother or sister says, ‘No,’ then you have to wait until it’s your turn. Another rule is that you have to be nice to each other. Examples of being nice are sharing, taking turns, and asking if you want to play together. Are you ready to try that?”

Then be sure to add, “Oh, and remember, if you do follow these rules and don’t grab or yell, each of you will get to choose your own special treat after. But if you don’t follow the rules, you will not be allowed to have a treat. Do you both understand?” For younger children, parents should ask them to repeat back the rules to be sure that they understand them. Teaching children to be both mindful of expectations and to anticipate their own behaviors is crucial; these are developmentally important skills that need to be learned. Now that you have steps for predispute, you can be better prepared for what to do when fights erupt.



Congratulations for getting through steps 1 and 2! You’re well on your way to making considerable change in how you parent and how your children behave. The next chapter focuses on steps 3 and 4—what to do during disputes and afterward.