



Pick Your Path to Health

Sibling Rivalry

African American families, like all families, value the special bond between sisters and brothers. Although many sibling relationships grow into mature adult friendships, it is not uncommon for sibling rivalry to ruin what should be a precious bond.

There are numerous reasons why siblings might not get along from time to time. "You do have siblings who have insecurities" about who a parent likes best, says Dr. Ivor Horn, a pediatrician at Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

Mothers, in particular, can minimize contentious situations by easing their children's insecurities. They can also foster healthy sibling relationships by avoiding comparisons or rivalry-provoking complaints and by staying neutral during conflicts.

Mary Lee Davis of Atlanta took a healthy approach to diffuse a conflict brought on by her daughter Joyce's unresolved jealousies of her 26-year-old brother Rayford's intelligence. "He's an analytical-mathematical type, who's really smart about things that I'm clueless about," says Joyce, 30, a self-described "touchy-feely-artsy-writer" type.

Something set off Joyce during the week between Rayford's high school graduation and her college graduation. "I said some really mean things to him," she recalls. "My mother took me aside and explained to me exactly how my brother and I were gifted in different ways."

"I can appreciate our differences now," Joyce says.

Not only is it crucial to know how to settle an argument between your children, but it is also necessary to know how to prevent these situations before they arise.

"It's important for parents, especially in big families, to find some special time for each child," says Dr. Horn. "Also, when a new baby comes, get the older children involved right from the beginning and make them a special part of the process in welcoming the baby into the family early on."

Here are some ways to combat rivalry from Stacy Nagel, Ph.D., who specializes in sibling relationships. Dr. Nagel is an assistant professor of

psychology at California State University in San Bernardino, California, and one of the experts on "Ask the Pros" at www.parenthoodweb.com.

- Give each child some time alone with you.
- Don't pressure your children to play together, go places together, be affectionate with each other, etc. Children who are given the freedom to find their own activities and interests typically enjoy spending time with their siblings much more.
- Monitor rivalries, but let children in middle school work things out among themselves. When parents *jump into* sibling quarrels, they often protect the weaker (usually younger) sibling against the stronger (usually older) sibling. This can escalate the battle, making the stronger sibling feel resentful and the weaker one fight back more because the parent is "on their side."
- Seek professional help if sibling rivalry turns into sibling abuse. Take action if your children are physically violent with each other (with or without weapons), or if one child is always the aggressor and the other is always the victim, never fighting back.
- Watch for signs of stress that can heat up sibling relationships. Have your children experienced major life transitions lately—a new school, a move, changes in your relationship with a partner, changes in their peer relationships?
- Take some time one-on-one with each child to ask him or her what they like best and least about their siblings. This will be a good way for you to monitor what might be going on between them, but it also is a way for you to discover that they probably really like some things about each other.

For more information, check out the following books and Web sites:

- http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/feelings/sibling_rivalry.html
- National Women's Health Information Center at www.4woman.gov or (800) 994-WOMAN or TDD at (888) 220-5446
- *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *Preventing Sibling Rivalry: Six Strategies to Build a Jealousy-Free Home* by Sybil Hart, Ph.D.
- *Beyond Sibling Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Become Cooperative, Caring and Compassionate* by Peter Goldenthal

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."