

sibling Squabbles

Or, lifelong lessons in cooperating

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 JACK AND BEN'S CLOTHING AND SHOES FROM **PUMPKIN & BEAN, ENGLEWOOD**

“He started it!”

As long as there have been siblings in the world, there have been squabbles. From the moment that the firstborn realizes that he or she will have to share the precious resources of parental time, money and attention with another one, two or five people, the fights start. Whether it's as simple as who started the latest scuffle or as complex as how to divvy up the proceeds from the sale of a family business, competition among siblings doesn't always end when the last one leaves home.

“I feel like everyone tries to fight for my attention,” says Vanessa Nowinski of Lyndhurst. And no wonder! The

When To Worry?

- If escalating tensions lead to physical violence.
- If one child is taking over the other's space, destroying property or verbally abusing the other child in a way that seems excessively hostile.
- If the sibling rivalry is affecting family harmony to the extent that you find yourself avoiding outings or family get-togethers due to fighting between your children.

Nowinski siblings are stair-step ages: Benjamin, 7; Olivia, 6; and Jack, 5.

Dr. Frank Sileo, Ph.D., a psychologist in Ridgewood and the executive director of The Center for Psychological Enhancement, says that although sibling fights can get on parents' nerves, adults should understand that this is typical behavior. “It's never likely to be eliminated, nor should it be,” he says. “Some quarrels are a healthy indication that a child in the family isn't completely submissive. Part of it is learning about power and where they fit in the world.”

Since most people have brothers or sisters, parents have also experienced their fair share of sibling rivalry in their own lives, and that can cast a shadow over how they respond to fighting between their own children. The adult who feels that she was always stuck in a certain role in a family such as “the smart one” or “the pretty one” may feel particularly anxious if she sees her children falling into similar patterns. However, experts say, it's important to recognize that you don't have to make the same mistakes that your parents made. “We often parent how we were parented. Remember what worked when you were a child and what you felt,” says Sileo. “Just because you had a problem with your sister doesn't mean that has to happen with your kids.”



tolerate negative affect," says Dr. Randye Huron, director of the Institute for Child Development, Joseph M. Sanzari Children's Hospital, Hackensack University Medical Center. Huron is also the mother of 9-year-old twins. "Dealing with your siblings who get things that you can't have means there's conflict, but it also teaches children how to compromise," Huron says. She adds that learning how to compete at home has benefits. "Competition pushes children to acquire skills that they may not have pursued otherwise."

Sileo adds that parents shouldn't be quick to jump in and resolve differences between their children. "Kids need to work out differences on their own whenever possible," he says. "It teaches them how to share and how to build positive relationships."

Kathleen Valencia of Fair Lawn, mom to 13- and 10-year-old boys, says that her philosophy on sibling rivalry is to make sure that each child has what they need. "I don't worry about making things equal; I worry

Lessons Learned From Siblings

- Social skills
- Conflict resolution skills
- Negotiation
- Understanding another person's perspective
- Teaching moral social codes
- Being constructive with criticism

Nowinski says a technique she relies on is "to give everyone their own time." Her youngest, Jack, is a kindergartner who is happy to have some extra homework help just before bed. "I told him, it will be you and me going over ABCs or numbers – and I made his day!"

Sileo adds that when two siblings happen to be good at the same thing, parents shouldn't foster competition but praise accomplishments. "Talk about how proud you are that they enjoy and are dedicated to something," he says. "We put a lot of

It's All in the Family

The flip side of sibling competition, however, is sibling teamwork, and that can and should be fostered by parents. "I always tell my boys that friends will come and go but your brother is forever," says Valencia.

Nowinski says friendship is definitely the upside of having three children close in age. "When they get along, they get along; they are really close."

Huron adds that the same things that make for a happy family life – spending time together, giving each child some one-on-one time with a parent or their own space – also serve to mitigate sibling conflict. "One of the lessons that I learned very early with my two is that they have their own strengths as individuals," she says. "And they have their own names. They aren't just 'the twins.'"

Sileo adds he has seen sibling rivalry at every age, and every stage, whether or not the children in question are the same gender or close in age. He says that the key is not trying