

When Brothers Fight, What Can Parents Do?

Fighting brothers are challenging for parents. Expert parenting advice on how can a parent bring peace to battling brothers and stop brother fights.

The shifting sands of brother sibling relationships are often filled with frights and delights to watchful parents. Family time can be filled with the most endearing interactions, but then a wrong turn is followed by a menacing retaliation. Parents shake their heads in disbelief, confused by what they witness, and even more puzzled by what to do about it. Banishment to separate rooms, compulsory apology notes, and other standard consequences seldom sews together the splintered threads of such ambivalent sibling relationships.

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If this sorry scene too often impinges upon your happy home, here are some coaching tips to turn battling brothers into peaceful partners:

Take an honest look at what parent contributions may be intensifying tension. Fathers need to especially review how they might unwittingly stoke the "fraternal fires" leading to fights between brothers. Sons tend to be alert to any signal from Dad that he is measuring their macho. Even an innocent sounding suggestion can turn up the competitive heat, i.e. "Let's see who can find the keys first." Similarly, fathers must be on guard against verbally comparing one son to another, or being drafted in to the role of referee, judge, or even steady quarter back since these set the stage for one son to be pitted against the other, with dad appearing to take sides. When brothers are driven to dominate one another, fathers must proceed with extreme caution. When events cast winner and loser, brother acrimony may linger longer than expected.

Quickly address hostility without blaming and fact-finding. Parents must be sensitive to how easily fighting brothers can misinterpret a parent's attempts to uncover the truth behind incidents. Little is usually gained by this approach. It's better to strive for imparting tolerance to both boys in their attitudes toward each other. This requires prompt insertion of parent peace efforts by separating them, allowing each to tell their side of the story, and requiring each to imagine how the other is feeling at that moment. The goal is to persuade each boy to step into the shoes of the other, building an "empathy bridge" that will eventually guide them to mindful awareness when opportunities for battle are presented. For example, rather than attack, an older brother says to himself, "He just feels jealous of my trophy and that's why he called it a wimp medal," when his little brother provokes him.

Appeal to family ties in your discussions with them about the problem. Children have little knowledge of how the sibling inflicted pains of childhood leave lasting scars that impact upon adult relationships. It's up to parents to make them aware of how physical pain may subside but emotional pain remains. "The pain you put each other through is stored in your memories, and may someday stand in the way of the adult brothers you become," or "Before you say it, remember the pain remains." gets the message across. Perhaps there is an example of a cut-off in the extended family, rooted in childhood experiences, that can serve as a lesson of what can happen.

Enlist their help in drafting a brother pledge. Explain how much like the Pledge Of Allegiance is recited as an act of country loyalty, brothers can pledge their loyalty to having a better relationship. Spell out the terms on a piece of paper and request that each sign the pledge. Challenge them to use secret signals to remind each other and see if they can keep track of how many "zero physical conflict" days they can attain. Consider a reward for their peaceful progress.

About Dr. Steven Richfield: Known as "The Parent Coach," Dr. Richfield is a child, adolescent, and adult psychologist, parent/teacher trainer, and creator of the Parent Coaching Cards. Contact him at 610-238-4450 or director@parentcoachcards.com