A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PARENTS

My Kids Won’t Stop Fighting… Now What?

A Sanity-Saving, Screaming-Reducing, Reality-Accepting Guide for Real Parents in Real Homes

Welcome to the club of questionable affection

Your children love each other, in theory. But lately? There’s bickering, screaming, and full-blown turf wars over who sits where, who got more syrup, and who breathed first.

You’ve said “Be kind to your sister” more times than you’ve blinked this week. So now you’re asking:

> **What now, at home, when they’re constantly fighting, you’re constantly refereeing, and every shared activity ends in a dispute?**

This guide is about understanding the pattern, responding without losing your mind, and teaching skills for sharing space. The goal is a safer, more respectful relationship, not compulsory best-friend status.

Sibling rivalry 101

Competition and disagreements are common. Children may be negotiating attention, privacy, possessions, or fairness. Hunger, fatigue, stress, communication differences, and unmet support needs can add friction. Sometimes it really is about the waffle.

Ordinary conflict can offer chances to practice solving problems. Hitting, intimidation, repeated humiliation, and one-sided aggression are not harmless practice. They require adult protection and intervention.

> **You can listen fairly without treating both children as equally responsible.**

Start with safety. When there is injury, fear, coercion, or a repeated power imbalance, do not ask children to work it out alone. See page 6 for when to seek professional help.

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Reports, arguments, and flying elbows

01 Constant reporting, aka “MOM!”

You might hear: “He looked at me funny!” Or something that sounds minor but turns out not to be.

• Start with: “Tell me what happened. Is someone hurt, scared, or unable to make it stop?” Keep asking for help safe, even when reports are frequent.

• For a minor, safe disagreement, coach a script: “Please stop,” “I’m using that,” or “I need space.” Help them practice rather than sending them back unprepared.

• If the other child won’t stop, or there is aggression, step in. A child does not have to confront a sibling first to earn help.

> **“You can always tell me when someone is hurting or scaring you. We can also practice handling small disagreements.”**

02 Physical fights

You might see: Shoving, hitting, kicking, or throwing objects.

• Stop the interaction and create safe distance. Use few words: “I won’t let anyone hit. We’re separating now.” Check injuries and comfort the child who was hurt.

• When calm, hear each child separately. Find out what happened before deciding on responsibility or consequences.

• Teach a replacement: ask for a turn, step away, or get an adult. Follow through with a reasonable response that addresses the unsafe behavior.

Safety before mediation

Do not require a joint conversation while one child is frightened or being intimidated. Avoid assigning equal blame just because both were involved. The child who was harmed needs protection, not a lesson in accepting their share of someone else’s aggression.

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Mean words and the fairness department

03 Name-calling & hurtful words

You might hear: “You’re stupid!” “No one likes you!”

• Intervene calmly: “Calling someone stupid is hurtful. Stop. Tell me what you need without insulting them.”

• When ready, practice a redo: “I’m angry that you took my pencil. I want it back.” A better script does not erase the need for repair.

• Follow up privately with the child who was targeted. Ask whether it happens often or continues when adults aren’t nearby.

> **“Being angry is allowed. Threats and humiliation aren’t.”**

04 Jealousy or perceived favoritism

You might hear: “You always help her first!” “He gets everything!”

• Acknowledge it: “You felt overlooked. I want to understand.” Check whether your own pattern needs changing.

• Explain differences without dismissing fairness: “He needs help with this right now. Your needs matter, too. Here’s when I can help you.”

• Avoid comparisons about grades, behavior, appearance, or who is “easy.” Do not make one child the family example or the permanent problem.

Fairness needs something concrete

“Fair doesn’t always mean equal” is useful only when children can see that everyone’s needs count. Pair it with predictable turns, clear expectations, and individual attention.

> **“You don’t have to get the exact same thing to matter equally to me.”**

Different ages or support needs may call for different help. That does not mean one child must always yield, act older than they are, or tolerate harm.

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You did not apply to be a full-time referee

You may decide too quickly who’s at fault

One child is louder. One cries first. One has an excellent courtroom voice. None of those facts tells you the whole story.

> **“I stepped in to keep everyone safe. Now I’m going to hear what happened from each of you.”**

If you blamed the wrong child, correct it. If one child harmed the other, address that clearly. Fairness does not require neutrality about harm.

You may say, “I don’t care who started it”

Because you’re exhausted. But how it began may reveal repeated targeting, a boundary violation, or someone trying to protect themselves.

> **“I care how this happened, and I care what happens next. First, we’re going to stop and get safe.”**

You may want to let them fight it out

You don’t have to solve every minor disagreement. Observe when both children are safe, have a real voice, and can stop or walk away. Step in for aggression, intimidation, or a child who cannot manage the situation.

You may lose your own cool

> **“I’m sorry I yelled. I needed to stop the hitting, and I could have done that more calmly. The no-hitting rule still stands.”**

Model repair without making your children responsible for your stress. If conflict is constant, ask for help examining the pattern rather than expecting yourself to referee harder.

Separate activities, a snack, or a break from shared space can prevent another round. Temporary distance is often more useful than insisting on togetherness while everyone is fried.

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Fewer flashpoints. More useful skills.

Make the household rules specific

“Be kind” is a good value and a vague instruction. Try: no hitting, no threats, ask before taking belongings, stop when someone says stop, and get adult help when safety is involved. Invite ideas; adults remain responsible for safety rules.

Reduce the predictable disputes

• Use a visible rotation for shared choices, such as who picks the show. Protect personal belongings and space, too.

• Build in separate time and individual attention. Older children are not automatically responsible for entertaining or regulating younger siblings.

• Plan around tired or hungry periods. Adapt expectations to communication and developmental needs.

Practice outside the argument

> **“I felt frustrated when you took my game. Please ask first.”**
> **“I need a break. I’ll talk when I’m calmer.”**
> **“Can you help us make a turn-taking plan?”**

Role-play a familiar disagreement. Use a story or show to discuss what each person needed and what a safer response could look like.

Repair should do something

Return the item, help fix what was damaged, or change how the next turn works. Ask the child responsible: “What can you do to make this right?” Support an honest apology rather than a forced performance.

The child who was hurt does not have to hug, forgive immediately, or accept a note as the end of the matter. Reconnection can wait until it feels safe.

Notice what goes well

Be specific: “You asked before borrowing that,” or “You both took a break before it got physical.” Offer shared activities when both want to participate, rather than using togetherness as a punishment.

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Home should feel safe for every child

Look beyond ordinary rivalry

Seek professional help for repeated aggression, threats, humiliation, destruction of belongings, or one child being persistently targeted. Notice fear, avoidance of shared spaces, injuries, or changes in sleep, school functioning, or mood.

A power difference based on age, size, ability, or family role can make “work it out together” unsafe. Take disclosures seriously. Sexual touching, coercion, or other sexual boundary violations need immediate safeguarding and professional guidance.

Make a protection plan

Separate and supervise as needed. Do not leave a child alone with a sibling they fear. Start with the pediatrician or a qualified mental health professional to assess needs and plan support. Address each child’s behavior and needs without making protection conditional on cooperation.

Get medical care for injuries as needed. Call 911 if there is immediate danger you cannot safely stop, a serious injury, or another emergency.

A note to the parent who is trying

You’re raising humans who are learning to share space, attention, and you. They don’t have to enjoy each other every minute. They do need to know that boundaries count, help is available, and harm will be addressed.

> **“You can disagree. You can need space. You both deserve to be safe here.”**

Further reading

American Academy of Pediatrics
HealthyChildren.org • Helping Siblings Build Healthy Bonds
Healthy Children Podcast • Sibling Rivalry, Episode 58

University of New Hampshire / SAARA
Sibling Aggression and Abuse Research and Advocacy Initiative
unh.edu/saara/our-work/sibling-aggression-abuse
siblingsbeyondrivalry.org • Parent and Caregiver Guides

This guide offers general education. Repeated aggression, abuse, or safety concerns require individualized assessment and a protection plan, not ordinary conflict-resolution exercises.

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