Can You Handle Your Children’s 3,351 Conflicts?

The risks of leaving sibling squabbles and bullying behavior unchecked.

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Few would argue that a second or third child adds to parental time pressures and [stress](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/stress). With the arrival of a new baby, previous routines go out the window. Many [parents](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/parenting) think that as children get older, their lives will become more manageable, easier. This is a misconception if only because they do not factor in other, less-talked-about aspects of [sibling](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/family-dynamics) life—the [jealousy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/jealousy), the vying for parental [attention](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/attention), the feelings of favoritism, the potential [bullying](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/bullying%22%20%5Co%20%22Psychology%20Today%20looks%20at%20bullying)and the often, unending squabbles.

Although parents try to foster affection and [friendship](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/friends) among their children, much of this effort and good intentions go unheeded. The number of battles and amount of taunting and stress that siblings bring to families can be staggering and intimidating.

In one study, researchers found that “sibling relationships have a substantial and lasting effect on children’s development.” Disagreements can be more than petty quarreling, having repercussions that last a lifetime. The study, “Bullying in the family: sibling bullying” may surprise parents who think that it’s natural and not alarming for siblings to argue beyond the occasional spat. The study reported that “up to 40 percent are exposed to sibling bullying every week, a repeated and harmful form of intra-familial [aggression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/anger).”

The authors also point out that sibling bullying can up the chances of peer bullying and “is independently associated with concurrent and early adult emotional problems, including distress, [depression](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/depression), and [self-harm](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/self-harm). The effects appear to be cumulative, with those children bullied by both siblings and peers having highly increased emotional problems compared with those bullied by siblings or peers only, probably because they have no safe place to escape from bullying.”

Understandably, parents don’t want to acknowledge that siblings treat each other maliciously, even when the fights reach alarming levels of intensity. Parents tend to ignore the situation or rationalize it by telling themselves that kids will be kids, she didn’t mean it, or they will outgrow the fighting. Parents want to believe their children’s behavior is a normal part of growing up.

However, as many as 74 percent of siblings push or shove their brothers and sisters and 40 percent go further: They kick, punch, and bite their siblings. Eighty-five percent of siblings are verbally aggressive on a regular basis with their siblings.

One Clash Every Ten Minutes

Parents tend to minimize sibling conflicts. Perhaps most believe that they’ll resolve themselves and some do. However, in many families, sibling bickering is enough to affect relations and morale for years. In the study, “Parent and Sibling Influences on the Quality of Children’s Conflict Behavior across the Preschool Period,” researchers followed preschool siblings in 37 two-child families over a two-year period; they observed when the children were two and four years old and again when they were four and six.

The conflicts averaged a whopping 3,351 per family. This astonishing number amounts to about six altercations per hour, or about one clash every ten minutes for the younger children.

The fights diminished to four per hour when the children were older, but the older children’s conflicts lasted longer. In these disagreements, the children used threatening, teasing, and physical aggression. Parents intervened in about half the instances, but parental intervention does not necessarily affect children’s conflict-resolution behavior.

People who defend difficult sibling relationships are quick to argue that kids will most likely learn to get along. This study showed that tension does not necessarily dissipate over time—it changes. As children get older and have better verbal skills and maturity, their capacity to resolve differences improves, but so does the opportunity for more powerful opposition. The quarreling is often constant: “It’s my turn,” “Give it back, or “It’s mine,” projects through the house at the top of one or both child’s lungs: “How come she gets to stay up later?” “I hate her.” Siblings don’t have to be on their best behavior with each other as they would be with friends, and often they aren’t.

It may be the case that siblings never find a way to exist free of tension. Early rivalries can develop into adolescent and adult envy.

When Teens Quarrel

What started out small as toddlers—perhaps with a skirmish over a toy—escalates to enduring [competition](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/sport-and-competition) over grades in [school](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/education) or soccer [goals](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/motivation). In some families, competitiveness cloaks everything, even if the children are different ages and on different teams or have completely different interests.

When children are teens, jealousy can become daily fare. Disgruntled siblings say things like, “He’s more popular,” “My sister is much prettier,” “She’s going to get into a better college than I am,” “He landed a better [job](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/career),” “My sister is richer,” “My brother is good at whatever he tackles.” Parents watch, listen, and wonder what provoked such animosity between children they dearly love.

Much evidence supports the idea that disagreements and arguments between siblings are effective for teaching children to fend for themselves in the larger world. For some children that may be true, but for others, sibling fighting only leads to distress and turmoil—and, at its worst, persistent verbal abuse and physical blows. The [combative nature](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/singletons/200911/who-is-the-most-violent-person-in-your-family) leaves deep emotional—and at times physical—scars.

Don’t Ignore Complaints

These early conflicts and bullying behaviors can have long-lasting effects. The study, “Family Dynamics and Young Adults’ Well-Being: The Mediating Role of Sibling Bullying” found that for its victims, “sibling bullying was associated with lower sense of competence, [self-esteem](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/self-esteem), and life satisfaction, as well as more internalized problems.”

Parents want to pay close attention to how children interact and take steps to intervene when indicated. It is critical to view sibling disagreements and bullying as seriously as peer bullying at school and on social [media](https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/basics/media)—and its prevention—is taken today.