



Getting Along With Siblings

If the sounds of “He hit me!” or “She’s hogging the TV!” are echoing through your home, you’re not alone. Sibling rivalry is as common as vegemite sandwiches in households with multiple kids. Sure, having an only child might guarantee peace and quiet, but most of us are raising a whole crew, navigating the inevitable clashes that come with it.

But here’s the thing: some squabbling is perfectly normal. It’s how kids learn to share, compromise, and stand up for themselves. However, it’s crucial to know when those playful tugs-of-war cross the line into something more hurtful.

So, how do you tell the difference between everyday bickering and behaviour that needs parental intervention? Here are some questions to consider:

- 1. Is it one-sided?** If one child consistently hurts, manipulates, or excludes the other, it might be a sign of bullying. Look for patterns of aggression, teasing, or control, especially if the targeted child isn’t instigating the conflict.
- 2. What’s the motive?** Are the children fighting over typical kid stuff like toys or attention, or is one sibling intentionally trying to hurt or humiliate the other? If the motive is malicious, it’s crucial to address the behaviour promptly.
- 3. How old are they?** Young children are still developing conflict resolution skills, so some immature behaviour is expected. However, as they grow, you can teach them healthier ways to express their emotions and resolve disputes.

If you suspect your child is bullying a sibling, here are some steps you can take:

- 1. Model respectful behaviour.** Children learn by watching their parents. Demonstrate calm and respectful communication, even when dealing with conflict.
- 2. Spend quality time with each child.** Unmet needs for attention and connection can fuel misbehaviour. Dedicate individual time to each child to strengthen your bond and make them feel secure.
- 3. Encourage perspective-taking.** Perspective is the root of empathy (and empathy is the key to conflict resolution!). Ask questions like, “How do you think your sister felt when you said that?” or “What could you have done differently?” As they see the impact they have on others (and vice versa), they feel empathy and make changes that are much longer lasting than changes that are forced upon them by powerful parents.
- 4. Teach conflict resolution skills.** Equip your children with tools to resolve disagreements peacefully. This could involve teaching them to take turns, compromise, or use “I” statements to express their feelings.
- 5. Seek professional help if needed.** If the bullying persists or escalates, don’t hesitate to seek guidance from a therapist or counsellor who specialises in children’s behaviour.

Remember, some sibling conflict is normal and even healthy. It provides opportunities for children to learn important social and emotional skills. However, by addressing bullying behaviour early on and teaching healthy conflict resolution strategies, you can create a more peaceful and supportive environment for your children to thrive.



AUTHOR

Dr Justin Coulson

Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit [happyfamilies.com.au](https://www.happyfamilies.com.au).

