

How to handle siblings that fight

Although all siblings will fight at times, they should have a good relationship with each other. What should parents do when siblings fight and have a strained relationship?

Our default instinct is to punish the offending child. Although this may be necessary in some situations, it isn't ideal for long-term behavior change. Instead of behavior change, often it just shifts the child's focus to the "unfairness" of the parent. This might further damage the relationship with the sibling that "told" or "cried out".

What should we do instead?

1. First, during a period when neither is primitive (upset), you should explain to the children that if they have a close relationship with each other, they will both have higher long-term happiness. On the other hand, if they don't have a close relationship, they will both have lower long-term happiness. They need time to think about this so you don't want to say it when they are mad at each other. As a side note, you can also say the same is true for their relationship with each parent.
2. Next, when they have a serious argument where feelings are clearly hurt, you want to wait until both have calmed down. This might take an hour or longer. When they are both calm, you will require them to name 3-5 feelings (from the emotion list below) that the other sibling had during the argument and why they had those feelings. The child will not want to do this so usually you have to take something away until they are ready (no tv, take away their device, send them to their room, etc.) Say something like "Let me know when you are ready to name <siblings> feelings, but no TV until you are ready."

Parent: Ok, sibling 1 I want you to look at this emotion list and name 3 (or 5) emotions from the list that you think your brother/sister felt during this situation.

Child: They may grumble a bit, say they can't or try one of the tactics below

- They will want to talk about their own feelings. Don't let them do this unless they are clarifying their feelings to the sibling who is trying to guess. When siblings yell feelings at each other they are actually "weaponizing" feelings which will make the primitive portion of their brain take

over when feelings are discussed. We never want to weaponize feelings so we stay away from “I feel” statement and instead use “Did you feel” statements.

- They will try to do it in a sarcastic, angry, or condescending way. If you see this, say something like “It looks like you aren’t ready to do this and really mean it. Let me know when you are ready but no TV/devices/etc. until you are ready.”
- They will say it is a punishment. You can explain that it just helps them learn empathy which is a core value in our family but they can call it punishment if they want.

Parent: Don’t let them get out of it but you can help them the first few times. For younger kids, you may need to read them some related emotions and explain what the emotions mean.

For each appropriate emotion that they pick, then ask “Why do you think they felt <emotion>?”

When one child has named 3-5, then switch to the other child and have them name 3-5 of the other child.

When both have completed the task, it is done.

Why does it work?

This method is effective because it changes long-term behavior. When a child comes up with the feelings of the sibling, they can’t help but feel those negative feelings themselves. In the future, when they are about to hurt their siblings feelings again, they will preemptively feel the feelings they are about to cause in their siblings. Since none of us like to feel negative feelings, they will shy away from the behavior.

Emotion List

1

Try to choose 3 emotions you are feeling

2

Identify where in the body you are feeling these emotions

3

Try to name WHY you are feeling each emotion

COMMON EMOTION LIST

DON'T USE (TOO BROAD)

Happy

Mad

Sad

Bad

HAPPY EMOTIONS

Curious

Proud

Confident

Respected

Courageous

Peaceful

Loving

Optimistic

Inspired

Playful

Brave

Thankful

Joy

UPSET EMOTIONS

Pressured

Depressed

Angry

Bored

Scared

Lonely

Let down

Stressed

Defensive

Abandoned

Humiliated

Tired

Worried

Unimportant

Betrayed

Overwhelmed

Worthless

Hopeless

Jealous

Surprised

Stupid

Guilty

Frustrated

Confused

Disrespected

Ashamed

Annoyed

Bullied

Excluded

Disappointed

Disgust

Down

Threatened

Embarrassed

Contempt

Unloved

Nervous

Ugly

Misunderstood

Small