Teenage sibling fighting

Sibling fighting – sometimes it seems to happen all the time. If you approach these battles in a constructive way, you can stop siblings fighting and help your teenagers learn important skills for adult life.

Sibling fighting: what you need to know

'Who said you could wear my clothes?' 'Get out of my room!' 'You've been on the computer for hours!'

It's normal for teenage siblings to fight over all sorts of things. Teenage siblings argue just as much as younger children, but they tend to fight about different things. They might also use different and more grown-up language.

Sibling fighting can be stressful for you, but it has a useful purpose. When children interact with parents, they learn about authority. Interactions between brothers and sisters help them learn about relating to peers.

Also, if it's handled the right way, **sibling fighting can help children learn important life skills**, such as how to:

- solve problems and resolve conflicts
- treat others with empathy
- deal with different opinions
- compromise and negotiate.

> Listening to children's fights can be infuriating and stressful, but this stage will pass. They might be fighting today, but siblings can offer each other support and protection at other times. Sibling squabbles can also help your children learn to be better friends, partners and workmates later in life.

Resolving sibling fights

Here are some suggestions for handling fights between teenage siblings.

Resolving arguments by themselves teaches children essential life skills, so **avoid always stepping in** to solve problems for them – although this might be faster and less stressful. Try asking your children to listen to each other's perspective. Then guide them towards a compromise, possibly using steps for problem-solving.

If your children need some help with conflict, **coach them** through it. You can model problem-solving for them by helping them work out what they're arguing about, asking them what they each want, and prompting them to come up with solutions together.

You can **look at what the conflict is about** rather than focusing on who started it. After all, if they're fighting, they're both responsible.

If you take sides, one child might feel unfairly treated and feel you're showing favouritism. It's better to **get both teenagers to state their problems**, and then brainstorm possible solutions. Writing things down can be a good idea, to make sure they get all the brainstorming ideas on paper.

You can also **motivate your children** to resolve the fight themselves. For example, if they're fighting over

the computer, take away their access to it until they can work out a solution together.

As your children work through this process, it's good – although not always easy – for them to try to stay calm.

Keeping track of how fights get resolved will help you make sure one child isn't dominating the other. Make sure that compromise does happen, and that they're each getting something. If they can't compromise, create a consequence for both of them.

Violent verbal or physical fights can harm the long-term relationship between siblings. You need to step in if your children are being verbally or physically violent towards each other.

Our Talking to Teens interactive guide explores some tricky parent and teenager situations. For example, you can see how different approaches to sorting out fights between teenage siblings can get different results.

How to stop siblings fighting in the future

You might be able to prevent or avoid fights between teenage siblings with a little bit of groundwork.

Equal treatment

- Try to be evenhanded. Teenagers are very quick to pick up on different treatment.
- Try not to compare siblings. Instead try to focus on each child's strengths. It's tempting to say things like 'Why can't you be more like your brother', or 'Your sister never did that'. But these messages can lead to bad feelings between siblings.
- Show affection to all your children. Try to spend quality time regularly with each of them.
- Try not to label your children. For example, talking about one child as the 'difficult' child can cause conflict or lead to challenging behaviour from that child.

Positive family relationships

- Give each child a personal domain. This could be a room that other children can enter only when invited, belongings that they don't have to share, or time with friends.
- Encourage joint interests or family activities like exercising, going shopping or watching movies together. You could even set the children a goal to work on together – for example, cooking a special meal for the family.
- Try to stay connected to your children. Keep the lines of communication open. Make sure your children know they can talk with you about any problem, and that you'll try to help them find a solution.
- Establish clear family rules. For instance, physical aggression is never OK. You might also want to make clear what kind of language is OK. For example, your family rules might include 'We speak to each other politely', and 'We don't tolerate swearing or threatening behaviour'.

Positive communication

- Avoid getting into debates about what's fair and equal. Explain to your children that their age difference might mean a difference in what they are allowed to do, and what responsibilities they have. Try to make sure that they get similar treatment at similar ages.
- Give your children a chance to voice their concerns in an appropriate way. You could have family meetings to talk about problems and suggest solutions.
- You can also be a positive role model when it comes to handling fights. Children of all ages can learn how to negotiate and deal with differences by watching and listening to their parents.

Getting support for sibling fighting

If your children are regularly fighting in physical, menacing or aggressive ways, you might need to do something about it. It's important to seek help when there's conflict that won't stop or that's having a negative or distressing effect on others.

The best place to start is by talking to your GP, who can give you advice and, if necessary, refer you to a psychologist who specialises in children's or teenagers' behaviour issues.

More facts about sibling fighting

Sibling fights peak in early adolescence, particularly when the youngest sibling hits this age.

If a younger teenager sees an older sibling as another authority figure, fighting can increase as the younger child tries to gain independence from both parents and siblings. When siblings are closer to each other in age – for example, by one or two years – they tend to fight more as the youngest reaches early adolescence.

Butting up against siblings is one way teenagers establish themselves as separate people with distinct likes and dislikes. This is part of their developmental journey towards autonomy and independence. How siblings work through their conflicts shapes the way they feel about and relate to each other.

Teenagers choose their friends based on similar likes and interests – but they can't choose their siblings. They might even feel they don't have much in common with them (apart from the same gene pool).

The most **common areas of conflict** between teenage siblings are equality and fairness, personal space, possessions and friends.

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- Social and emotional changes in adolescence
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- Relationships Australia

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