

# A fighting chance

Sibling rivalry is natural and unavoidable, but the ways in which parents respond to arguments can make a real difference to children's learning. *Kay Mathieson* offers some advice

**Q** A couple of our parents are having a really difficult time with their children constantly bickering. At the moment it isn't a problem in the setting, but the parents are worried that home behaviours will spill over to the setting. Do siblings always have to fight and squabble or is it the way in which parents respond that makes it more likely?

**A** The old adage 'you can choose your friends but not your family' combined with 'life's not fair' and the human competitive drive sums up the essence of sibling rivalry. The family, however it is made up, is a social group into which the children are born and have no choice. Therefore, this is the group in which much of their social learning takes place. It is an unusually intense and evolving context.

Stepping back from the specific roles and relationships for a moment, we can see that while developing as an individual, each member of the family is also building continuity in their responses to situations. Somehow, as parents, we need to bring together our developmentally realistic expectations of individual children and our striving for a mainly harmonious family life.

The first step is to accept that conflicts are inevitable; they will happen between adults as well as children. The second step is to consider that the way conflicts are dealt with in the family will contribute significantly to each child's growing understanding of relationships.

## TENSIONS

There are a range of influences that can increase sibling rivalry and particular phases of childhood and family life where things may be more difficult. The most obvious is the arrival of a new baby.

Whatever age siblings are, this is a difficult and challenging time. The



status quo in relationships disintegrates as the baby's needs take precedence. It is very hard to see how any child could avoid feeling, at least at times, that they have lost their place in parental affections.

The age gap between siblings as well as their experience outside the family will impact on their ability to deal with the challenges in the family situation. Essentially, children are learning about how to get on with others; they are trying out and developing defences as well as attacks that enable them to maintain their place in the group. The intensity of emotions is much greater in the family than with friends and the security of the family enables less inhibited expression of immediate feelings.

There are also other predictable tensions, such as younger siblings always wanting to be part of older siblings' activities. The younger are following their intuitive drive to learn from those who are older, but with less developed skills they can inadvertently 'ruin' the older siblings' game.

For the parent, there are several dangers inherent in their possible responses. Expecting the older child to

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## MORE INFORMATION

- *Children's Friendships: the beginnings of intimacy*, by J Dunn (2004)
- *How Children Develop Social Understanding* by J Carpendale and C Lewis (2006)

understand their younger sibling is a big ask, more so sometimes than others. Taking either child's side over the other adds the issues of fairness and favouritism to escalate the situation.

So the family offers us a complex web of relationships and intense emotions, with each child going through a range of developmental processes that impact directly on their understanding of themselves and others. This is to saying nothing of the ebb and flow of adult relationships.

## CONSTANCY OF LOVE

The approach most likely to result in a moderately happy experience for all, I would suggest, is similar to working with conflict in a childcare setting.

The principle is that the adults have the role of supporting each child to learn about dealing with conflict, negotiation and assertion, but also resilience, security, adaptability and the constancy of loving and being loved.

Overall messages that are worth thinking about are:

- There is always enough love to go around.

- Adults give all children 'good press', helping them to understand each other in different situations.
- As adults mediate situations they are helping children learn how to mediate, so children need to be involved in the process as developmentally appropriate.
- As individuals, we all need time on our own, time when we choose to be with others as well as times when we have to be together.
- Special time with a parent is a very precious experience and can help to consolidate relationships if managed sensitively.
- There are privileges that go with being older but also responsibilities.
- There are allowances that go with being younger, but also appropriately increasing expectations.

Although parents may think that they implicitly give the messages that they love all their children equally, this is seldom the belief of the children. Reinforcing the recognition that each child is different, with individual skills, strengths and attributes, is an important part of this process. Ultimately, investing in the 'good times' and giving positive feedback when children are sharing, enjoying being together, or supporting each other will help to maintain a balanced perspective as they grow.

A useful preventive measure can be to identify particular trigger times, such as first thing in the morning or after a stressful or busy day at work, school or nursery when everyone is tired and hungry. The successful strategy for such times will depend on the circumstance, as some children need to let off steam while others will benefit from undemanding 'chill' time.

## MEDIATING

The process of mediating between children can be frustrating and difficult, but useful as an opportunity to demonstrate you would like children to begin sorting things out for themselves. This can begin with a calm but firm 'stop' followed by a restatement of the issue – for example, 'you both want the paints' followed with a 'how can we make that work?'

However, some squabbles are fired over less straightforward things and arise more out of the intensity of having to be in each other's company. In this kind of situation, enabling both children to have some time and space on their own can be the answer. ■

## WORKING MUM

# A sinking feeling

**How practitioners deal with an incident such as biting can make a big difference to the outcome for child and parent, says Working Mum**

My daughter recently bit a child at nursery. It's a moment I've dreaded. There's something so carnal and aggressive about biting and the angry teeth marks left behind are awful. I hate to think of my 18-month-old doing that to another child.

My nephew was a serial biter when he was around two years old and I saw the anguish that my sister went through with him. It's seven years since there was last a biting incident and he's a loving, caring boy, but she still vividly remembers how ashamed she was made to feel by his behaviour. She felt he was labelled as 'naughty' at nursery, which also upset her.

On one occasion she was attending a toddler group at a children's centre when he bit a child who he was playing with. The injured child's mother shrieked, the person in charge demanded that an incident report was filled out, and my sister left and never returned. She got to a stage when she would avoid going to places where there would be other young children because she was so fearful that he'd sink his teeth into one of them.

## MORE TACT

Thankfully, the practitioners at my daughters' setting treated the biting incident with much more tact. I was quietly taken to one side and told sympathetically what had happened. The injured child wasn't named, much to my relief because I would have felt very apologetic and embarrassed in front of their parents. I was assured that DD2 (Dear Daughter 2) would also not be named when the other parents were informed.

DD2 had been playing in a tunnel with another child when she bit them. A staff member firmly told her 'no' and that she shouldn't bite and removed her from the situation. Unfortunately, the following day she had an altercation over a tricycle and bit another child. I was upset, but DD2's key person kindly reassured me that

it's a common phase for many children and that they regard it as a part of child development.

She told me that with both incidents my daughter was biting out of frustration and that they thought it was a defence mechanism. They also wondered whether she was teething. I was told that they would react swiftly and distract her if they thought she was about to bite another child.

I called my sister for advice on how she had managed my nephew's biting behaviour. She had tried lots of different approaches – from time out to giving him a toy that he could bite if he felt frustrated. Another mother recommended putting salt in his mouth when he bit someone and my

sister admitted that she was desperate enough to seriously considering doing so. In the end, she believes that it was a stage he simply grew out of after a few months.

I most certainly won't be reaching for the salt cellar, but I'm hopeful that this has been a short-lived phase for DD2. It's been over a month since there has been any reported biting at nursery. She's turned to love instead and has started cuddling people.

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