

# Sibling Rivalry

## Boosting sibling harmony

### 1 The Issue

Mummy, she's copying me! He took my toy! He won't play with me! She stole my doll . . . No, I didn't . . . Yes, you did!

Sibling rivalry is caused by a child's deep desire to have the exclusive love of their parents. Having another brother or sister could mean they now get less love. Security lies in having all of Mum, all of Dad, all of the toys, and all the space. Children have a deep need to be connected to their parents. They need lots of attention and reassurance that they are important to you; so they will frequently check

to see that they are important to you. When they quarrel with their siblings they are seeking to get your attention.

Sibling squabbles are a normal developmental response. With proper handling they provide children with wonderful opportunities to deal with and solve problems. So how should a parent end the teasing, bickering, and fighting?

### 2 Check it out

There can be many factors that trigger sibling rivalry. Some common triggers are: **A)** Tired and hungry. One Mum, who was constantly confronted with arguing children on the way home from Kindercare, discovered that if she gave her children a small snack as they got in the car there was no more arguing; **B)** Had a bad day at Kindy; **C)** Child is bored. Some bored children think it's fun to tease younger sister when there is nothing else to do! **D)** Emotional stress. Children feel intense emotions,

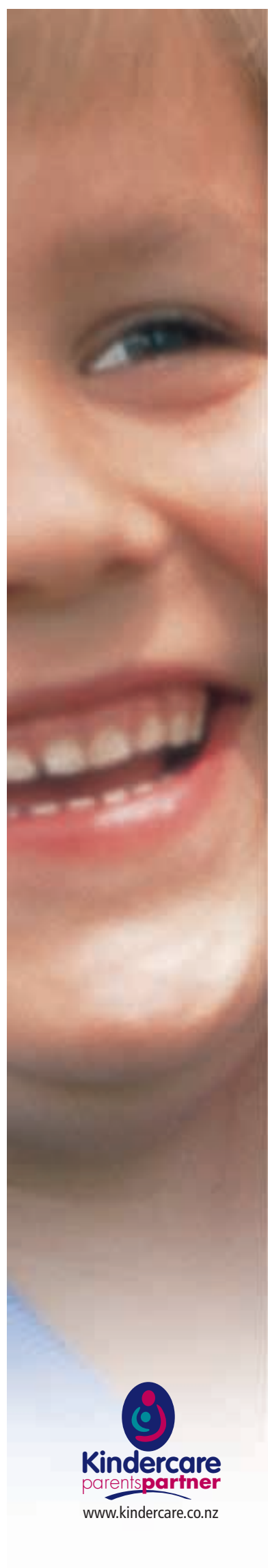
but often lack the verbal skills to express them. If your child is more aggressive than is called for, look for a deeper cause. For example, if a child, whose parents are separating, is constantly picking fights with a sibling, he may actually be angry with his mum or dad.

Children's behaviour usually follows a pattern. Identify the pattern and you'll probably find the trigger.

### 3 How to Respond

Rule number one for parents to promote sibling harmony is: Don't get involved in your kid's differences, or take sides. Once you do they win the battle and have power over you. Don't try to work out what happened, and who is right or wrong. That's simply setting you up to side with one child against the other. Try the following:

- Encourage your children to work out the problem themselves. Your children are smart and can solve their own problems. They only want to involve you to win a power struggle over their sibling. What they are really saying is, "I'm more connected to Dad than you are." So don't solve their problem!
- When your children realise you aren't going to solve their problems, you have taken away their incentive to quarrel in the first place.



- Don't ignore your children's bickering but encourage them to find a solution. Give a smile of approval when they find a solution. If they can't find a solution, guide them with questions, "What can you do instead of taking your sister's doll?"
- Set limits regarding what is acceptable behaviour in your family: no hitting, no pushing, no grabbing, and no swearing. Such limits provide safeguards that the rivalry doesn't become destructive.
- If a child becomes destructive sometimes threatening to separate your children works wonders; "You have 2 minutes to settle this or you'll have to stop playing together."
- Praise your children when they co-operate and play together. What gets noticed usually gets done.
- It's easy for children on long trips to annoy each other. Playing games are great distractions.
- As a parent, set a good example in how you and your partner solve problems. When children see Dad and Mum arguing they quickly follow their example.

Here are some ideas if you have recently had a new addition to the family:

#### **Prepare your child in advance**

Get your child acquainted with the idea of having a new brother or sister before the baby's born. Prepare them for the time and attention that will be needed to look after a new baby. But reassure them they won't be neglected, and that they will be loved just as much. Even if a new baby has arrived, this is still a good exercise to do with your child.

#### **Play up your oldest child's importance**

Even children as young as 2 love helping Dad and Mum. Once baby arrives, give your child jobs that make him feel needed and important in the life of the new baby.

#### **Don't leave her out**

Keep a few small gifts for your child for those times when visitors lavish presents and attention on the baby. A good response to friends admiration of your new baby is to reply, "Yes, now we have two beautiful children."

#### **Show him the benefits of being older**

Sometimes an older sibling will regress in behaviour to be like the baby. Show him that being a baby mightn't be much fun: babies drink from a bottle, can't ride bikes, can't eat yummy foods!

#### **Make the time**

Competing for Mum and Dad's attention with a new sibling can be tough, especially for children under 3, for whom sharing is a foreign concept. Don't promise your child equal time – the truth is, new babies require a lot more care. Find creative ways to include both children. As an example, put your baby in a sling, or infant seat, so you have two free hands for reading stories or playing games with your older child.

See each child as uniquely special. Don't play favourites or make unfair comparisons like, "I wish you would do as well as Mary does."

A child who constantly disrupts sibling harmony is usually a discouraged child. Discouraged children need lots of deposits in their energy bank account. See the ParentsPartner sheet on Self-esteem for ideas on how to encourage your child.