

# Sibling conflict



**Parents sometimes worry about their children arguing. It can be good to know some conflict between children in families is normal. It's part of how they learn to work out differences and get along with others. It is important for parents to role model being respectful when there are disagreements. You can help children work things out fairly until they learn to do this themselves. Parents can also help young children adjust to a new baby in the family.**

## When a new baby arrives

A new baby in the family brings big changes for everyone. While it may be very exciting for children they can also feel left out or less loved. Younger children in particular may not be able to tell you how they feel and can show it in their behaviour. This is normal. Give lots of hugs and tell them you love them. Spending special time together can help them feel loved and secure.

There are also things you can do before the baby arrives.

- Tell young children in simple ways about the baby but not too soon. They don't understand weeks and months and it can be a long time to wait.
- Babies can come into the family in a number of ways - pregnancy, adoption, surrogacy, foster or kinship care. If there is a pregnancy you could let your child/ren touch the 'baby bump' or feel baby kicking.
- Read books with them about a new baby coming home.
- Involve them in getting ready for the baby if they want to, eg preparing baby's room or cot.
- If there will be changes for your child/ren, make these well before baby arrives and turn them into special events, eg moving from a cot to a bed or new room.
- Consider whether they might enjoy starting at a playgroup or similar activity for their age.

- Try to reduce stress around the time of baby's arrival. Avoid toilet training unless your child clearly wants to do this. It's a big task for them.
- If they have to go somewhere else while mum is in hospital or be with someone they don't know well, help them get used to this before the baby is due.
- Tell them what will happen when baby arrives home so they know what to expect. You will need to say this many times.
- Take your child/ren to see mum and baby in hospital as much as you can. Make their visit special, eg some parents like to exchange small gifts between their child/ren and the baby. If they can't visit phone and video calls can help.

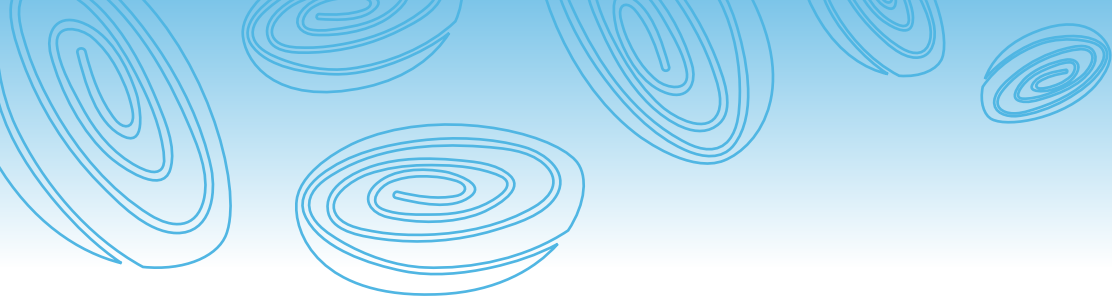
**When children feel loved and secure it helps them adjust and develop a positive relationship with their new sibling.**

You can expect children's behaviour to change when baby comes home, even if they are well prepared.

Toddlers and young children may:

- go back to younger behaviour, eg toilet training, getting dressed, bottle feeding. Let them do this for a while without comment. It will help them feel better sooner
- show other signs of stress, such as tantrums, especially when baby is feeding. Let them know you understand how they feel. You could do special activities together while baby feeds, eg read a book, watch a movie, play with special toys or tell them stories about when they were a baby. Some children like to have a doll they can 'feed' too.

If your child hits the baby, remove the baby from the situation. Say something like 'I know you're feeling upset/angry, but we don't hit'. Don't let them hit you either. Help them feel safe enough to express their feelings, eg 'It must be hard to share me with the baby'.



As they start to show you how they feel let them know you understand, eg 'You're mad because you think I don't play with you anymore. That must hurt so much'. Other emotions may then come out, eg fear, hurt, sadness. They learn it's okay to have hard feelings and you are there to help. You are teaching them how to manage their emotions without hurting anyone.

It can also help to:

- reassure children of your love. Spend special time just with them every day if you can. Other family members can do this too
- read them books about new babies showing the older child both happy and sad about the baby
- show them how to gently touch, hold or play with baby and praise them when they do this. Always be there to supervise
- let them help you with the baby in ways they enjoy
- point out some positives about being the older child, eg playing on the swings
- be patient and consistent. This can be challenging when you are getting less sleep and busy with the baby.

If your child is older it is just as important to prepare them for a new family member.

Some parents miss the relationship they had with their other child/ren before the baby arrived. Being aware of these feelings and giving yourself time to adjust can help you understand more about your child's feelings.

Sometimes a new sibling is not a baby. An older infant or child may be joining the family through adoption, fostering or kinship care. Reading books, talking through changes can help prepare children; there may be photos or a chance to meet beforehand.

## Conflict between children

As children grow, it can be hard for parents to see them arguing. You want them to get along. You may also long for a more peaceful home! Yet sibling conflict is one of the ways children learn how to be fair, respect others and work out differences without anyone being hurt. This will help them in future relationships.

Some children argue more than others because of their temperament or because they are still learning the skills they need to get along with others. Regardless of gender

and age difference, in most households there is some conflict between children. Even siblings who get on well most of the time have their bad days.

Younger children sometimes use aggression to get what they want. They are not yet able to communicate their needs in other ways. They will need plenty of practice, support and guidance to help them develop these skills over time. It can help to know children only start being able to share from three years onwards.

Children's conflict is often about usual, everyday things ('they took my ...', 'they did/said .....') and not particularly hurtful. This is different from sibling rivalry where children may compete for your love and attention. They can feel jealous if you seem to have more time for one child, or treat one child differently to another. If children feel they are not treated fairly by parents they can sometimes be aggressive towards their siblings. It's important to notice if this is happening and take steps to prevent any harm. It is also important to address what's causing these feelings.

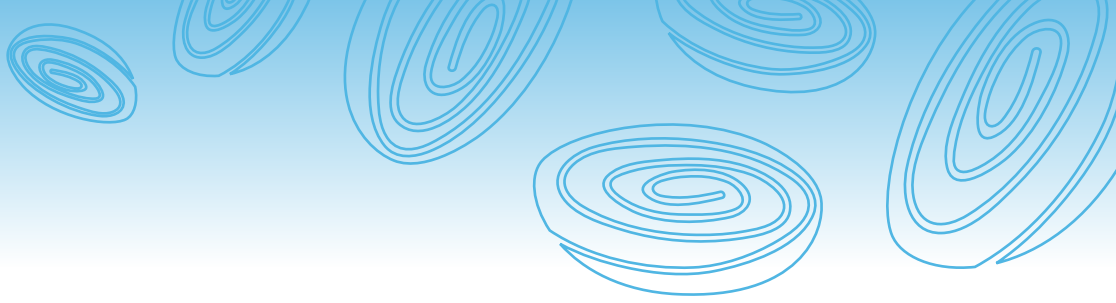
## Reducing conflict

You can help reduce arguments between children by noticing when they are tired or hungry and attending to these needs. If they are upset or angry help them find a quiet place to calm down - you may need to stay with them.

Parents can also reduce conflict by helping each child feel equally loved and valued.

- Try to spend equal time with each child on their own doing things they enjoy.
- Reduce jealousy by commenting equally on children's achievements, eg a piece of art work, a report card.
- Don't compare children – focus on each child's strengths and skills.
- Allow children to have special things of their own that their siblings don't touch.
- Ensure a younger child is not always left out of games if their sibling has a friend over. Find a balance between encouraging inclusion of the younger child and giving the older child time alone with their friend.
- Teach children to be kind and thoughtful to each other, eg making cards or presents for birthdays.





- Make time to have fun as a family, eg a beach trip, board game, movie night.
- Acknowledge children’s upset or angry feelings and help them find an outlet.

Treating children equally doesn’t necessarily mean treating them the same, eg an older child may be allowed to walk to school with friends or go to bed later. Explain the reason for any differences.

**Be kind to yourself if you don’t always get it right, no one does.**

## Encouraging siblings to cooperate

Children are more likely to get along when what is expected is clear, consistent, respectful and fair.

It helps to:

- talk with children from a young age about how your family wants to treat each other, eg ‘We are kind to one another’, and particularly when there are disagreements or upsets, eg ‘We try to work things out fairly’. Ask for their ideas about what they could do if they are upset with someone. Put a list (in words or pictures) on the fridge as a reminder
- explain the link between your family’s values and what’s expected, eg ‘In our family we treat each other nicely so we don’t hit or call each other names, even when we’re upset’
- give children (and especially young children) lots of practice and support as they learn these skills
- role model how to resolve conflict in a respectful way. Children will learn how to communicate their needs and repair relationships from seeing you do this
- share chores among family members in line with their age and development.

**Having clear ideas about ‘how we do things in our family’ helps children know what is expected. They’re more likely to cooperate if they’ve had a say in these ideas.**

## When there is conflict

Some parents think it’s best to let children work out their own differences but children are not born knowing how to do this. They need parents to show them. Teaching them how to manage their feelings and work things out fairly can mean less conflict in the long term.

Letting children ‘fight it out’ often means the oldest or strongest child always wins. This can encourage bullying. The other child may learn to just give in all the time.

It’s important for parents to help children calm down before trying to resolve conflict. It can help to:

- take a deep breath to calm yourself
- keep children close even if separate from each other
- help each child name their feelings and let them know you understand
- support them as they settle.

When both children are calm you can:

- remind them ‘how we treat each other in our family’
- let each child give their view of what happened. Resist the urge to say who you think is right or wrong, or focus on blame. It’s about letting each child feel heard and acknowledging their feelings without taking sides - this in itself often helps
- support each child to tell their sibling how they feel and what they would like to see happen. Don’t let the other child interrupt
- once they have listened to each other, ask children for ideas about how they might both get what they need, eg a child who wants something their sibling is playing with could ask them when they will be finished. Parents can help them learn how to wait (playing with something else, helping mum or dad with something) until they learn to do this themselves. Their sibling can finish the game and practise handing it over.

When parents assist children to problem solve it helps them build the skills to do it for themselves. The stronger child learns to listen to others and not have to win each time. The less powerful child gets better at speaking up for themselves. Both children learn it is their responsibility to help find solutions. They get to see their own strengths and the ways they can cooperate.





If children cannot come to an agreement you can step in and set a limit, eg 'I can see it's tricky to come up with a solution. For now I'll hold onto the game and when we think of an idea that might work we can have another go'.

As children get better at working things out parents can be less involved. Acknowledge their efforts to be respectful, eg 'I like how you listened to each other's ideas to work that out fairly'. This encourages the behaviour you want and builds their confidence to sort things out.

It's important children learn to repair relationships following conflict. Don't expect them to make amends when they are still upset. Give them time to calm first. You could say something like 'Once you're ready, I'd like to see you fix things with your sister'. Teach them to be specific about what they are apologising for, eg 'I'm sorry I knocked over your game/took your phone without asking and made you feel ....'. Ask them to think about how they might make things better for someone they've hurt, eg offer to help rebuild blocks/lego, make or lend them something.

**Once children have the skills to work things out fairly trust them to sort out differences on their own. Only get involved if they are having trouble, if there is bullying or a child is at risk of harm.**

## Is it more than sibling conflict?

While some conflict between siblings is common in most families, it's important to make sure no one is being bullied or harmed. It is very important to protect younger or vulnerable children.

If you are concerned about a child's behaviour contact a health professional for support, eg GP, counsellor, youth mental health service. Getting help early gives your child the best chance to make a positive change.

## Looking after yourself

Being around children's conflict, particularly when it happens a lot, can be challenging. While it's important to help children learn how to work out their differences or adjust to a new sibling, so too is looking after your own wellbeing.

- Take time to do things you enjoy.
- Find ways to relax and recharge.
- Acknowledge the skills you are helping your children learn.
- Be kind to yourself if you feel overwhelmed at times.
- Ask for help and support, eg from family, friends, services.

**Note:** The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

## Want more information?

### Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100, 24 hours  
For advice on child health and parenting  
Talk to local Parent Helpline between 7.15am–9.15pm.  
After 9.15pm your call will go through to the national Healthdirect helpline

### Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am–4.30pm, Mon-Fri  
for an appointment for children aged 0-5  
See [www.cafhs.sa.gov.au](http://www.cafhs.sa.gov.au) for child health and parenting information

### Family support services

#### Anglicare SA

Phone 1800 569 094, 9am–1pm, Mon-Fri  
<https://anglicaresa.com.au/children-families/parenting/family-support/>

#### Centacare

Phone (08) 8215 6700, 9am–5pm, Mon-Fri  
<https://centacare.org.au/service/counselling-services/>

#### Relationships Australia

Phone 1300 364 277 or 1800 182 325  
(country callers) 9am–5pm, Mon-Fri  
[www.rasa.org.au/services/couples-families/children-parenting-support/](http://www.rasa.org.au/services/couples-families/children-parenting-support/)

### Youth services

#### Youth Mental Health Service

Phone 13 14 65, 24 hours  
Supporting young people aged 16 to 24 to manage their mental health

#### Headspace

Information and free, confidential support for young people aged 12–25  
To talk face to face find your local centre at <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres/>  
Call 1800 650 890 to talk by phone or chat online at [www.eHeadSpace.org.au](http://www.eHeadSpace.org.au)

### Parenting

#### Raising Children Network

For parenting information including on sibling conflict [www.raisingchildren.net.au](http://www.raisingchildren.net.au)

#### Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Living with toddlers', 'Time In: guiding children's behaviour', 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2–12 years', 'Living with young people'  
[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)



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#### Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

[www.parenting.sa.gov.au](http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au)

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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