

SORTING OUT OUR DIFFERENCES

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I read an article that said that bickering and squabbling between brothers and sisters is natural and that unless things get heated, parents should just accept that it is a healthy way for kids to learn to live with one another. It went on to say that rivalry isn't unique to humans and that we see it in the animal kingdom constantly.

It does concern me that we, as parents, should accept fighting amongst family members as a normal and meaningful way to learn how to 'play nice'. Our children are not animals and to allow them to bicker and fight and disrupt household harmony as a means of improving relationships seems counter-productive to me. Wouldn't it be quicker and more proactive to teach them from an early age the value of being respectful so they don't get to such levels of frustration that anger bubbles over?

My husband, Brian, is one of three boys. When they started fighting one another, their father gave them all boxing gloves and ushered them into the back yard to duke it out. I asked him once, having been the youngest brother, how he fared. His reply was, "I bled!" I wonder what healthy lesson they learned from that?

I must confess that when our kids were small, I thought they would never stop arguing. Thankfully, when they reached their mid-teens, they turned the corner and are now best friends. (It also helps that they have their own families now and live in different countries. However, they always pine to see one another as often as possible). But, why did they act out in this way in their early years? Were they just re-enacting how they saw us solve our differences? No, we were peaceful, respectful parents. Did we purposefully train them to better manage their anger and frustration? No. Quite obviously we didn't!

Why didn't we step in and teach them a more appropriate way to handle their differences? Maybe we were so busy with our stuff that we were not aware of the telltale signs of trouble brewing until it was too late? Maybe we, like many, thought it was normal, gave in to the inevitability, and/or just crossed our fingers that they would eventually grow out of it. Maybe, way back then we didn't know how to deal with it. Nobody that we knew was qualified to answer our questions or we didn't know anyone who was doing any better. I am sincerely sorry now that we were not more proactive in showing our kids a better way.

So, how would I deal with squabbling kids as a young parent now?

Here are some suggestions:

1. Teach your kids to share, to wait their turn and to speak respectfully to one another.
2. Look at your own role modeling and handle your own differences in a way you would want your kids to manage theirs.
3. Check the environment frequently to gauge whether the balance of communication generally is more negative than positive. If negative, then observe the individual child's behaviors to work out the source.
4. Teach children to recognize their own anger levels. Do not allow the statement, "He made me mad!" but rather, "I am angry because...." Teach them that anger and negative reactions are a choice, rather than an acceptable reason for retaliation.
5. Watch out for bullying, overbearing or spiteful displays of behaviors and provide opportunities for your children to tell you about their personal frustrations.
6. Create a formula for dealing with potential arguments. It might be to:
 - a. Stop – work out what is happening. Take a deep breath. Walk away.
 - b. Think – Is this really worth fighting about? Is the current solution working? NOT!
 - c. Ask the other person how they might solve the problem together. Use words not fists to solve the problem.
7. Teach your children what the formula is and give them time to practice getting it right. If the problem cannot be solved, then involve a parent in creating a solution.
8. If you come upon an argument, separate the kids. Do not jump in with discipline until you have heard the full story. Don't raise your voice over theirs.

Peacefulness in the home is a precious thing. It stems from self-control and regard for others. Encouraging your kids to affirm one another face to face on a regular basis is a great start.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.