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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Smoothing the Rough Spots in Sibling Relationships**

Sibling relationships are complicated, individualized and changing over time for each sibling pair. We would like to share our response to a particular question that we received, with the expectation that some of the advice that we offered in this situation would be of help to other parents as well.

**Q.** We have two children – Kevin, is our seven year old son, and Melissa is our nine year old daughter. Sometimes they get along like best friends, and other times we almost have to pull them apart. How can we help them with the rough spots?

**A.** Sibling relationships are among the most meaningful and most complex. We can offer some reflections that may help with your question.

**Sibling relationships are individualized:** Every sibling relationship is unique. Each child is different, and each parental pair is different. The sibling relationship is also shaped by factors such as the sex, age gap, and mix of talents, interests and challenges for each child. Another important and often overlooked issue is that each parent has a different set of emotional reactions to each child based on his or her own history and the evolving relationship between that child and that parent. These differences affect the sibling relationship, since children will sense and react to these inevitable differences.

The sibling relationship is special in many ways. It has the intimacy of all nuclear family relationships, but it is more or less among peers. In usual

circumstances, siblings do not have to turn to each other to meet basic needs or for a sense of safety in the way that they turn to their parents. They also do not have to look to their siblings for guidance, although they may do so in certain circumstances. They do not have to rely on their siblings for a basic sense of worth or value, although a sibling's opinion might be important to some during certain developmental periods.

Therefore, siblings are free to take risks with each other because they are not dependent upon each other or subject to each other's control and authority. Siblings do boss each other around, of course, and sometimes there is a power dimension to a sibling relationship; but the power dynamic is different than the kind of authority that parents have, except in unusual and problematic situations.

**Implications and understanding aggression:** Because sibling relationships are unencumbered by the issues of dependency and authority that complicate relationships with parents, children are freer to express with siblings many of their feelings that they would hesitate to show or express to their parents. For example, your children may well share confidences with each other that they would be afraid to share with you.

Remember that all children have aggression, and learning to manage aggressive feelings is one of the crucial tasks in early childhood. Siblings offer children a zone where they can express these aggressive feelings, learn to be comfortable with them, and learn to find more mature ways of expressing them. Yes, siblings are jealous of what each receives from the parents, and their angers partly relate to that. But their angers relate to many other things, as well, on an individual basis.

Expressing and mastering aggression has an important growth-promoting dimension. Aggression provides an opportunity for you to help them think about what makes them angry, hold their feelings up to the light of reason, learn that there is a distinction between their right to feel angry and their right to inflict their anger on another, and discover that there are many ways

to express anger, some more constructive than others. These fundamental life lessons cannot be taught in the abstract; they are hard-won lessons, learned in the trenches where things are sloppy and dirty rather than clean and neat.

**Emphasize appropriate behavior:** Keeping this in mind, we recommend that you not try to talk your children out of their feelings, but that you emphasize their responsibility to act in a kind and respectful way. We don't know the particulars of how Melissa and Kevin relate, but it would not be uncommon for a 9-year-old girl to call her brother "dummy" or "stupid" after he messed up her doll collection, for example. In such a case, talk with Melissa. Aside from whatever decision you make about appropriate consequences for her (and Kevin!), you could tell her that you understand why she would be angry. However, calling someone names is not a good way to handle anger.

At this point, you can put the responsibility squarely on her shoulders by saying, "Melissa, it is your job to think about why your anger upsets you so much that you cannot think about better and kinder ways to deal with the situation. I can help you think about what happens inside you at those times. You know that there were better ways to handle it. You could have come to me for help, or you could have told Kevin that you were mad and really didn't like what he had done. Something inside made it hard for you to manage your anger in a way that you would feel good about."

This collaborative approach appropriately assumes that your child already knows other ways that she could have handled her anger. Think about how many times you have already made suggestions, and how many times she has seen others model appropriate responses. This approach also assumes that something inside of her was complicating her task, and also that she knows that she would feel more pride if she managed her anger better.

Your task is not to eliminate ambivalence in sibling relationships — that is neither possible nor desirable. All relationships have mixed feelings, and

children have a wonderful opportunity with their siblings to learn how to live within a mixed relationship and make the most of it. This learning takes time, but when it happens, your children will have a stronger framework for successful future intimate adult relationships.