**Sibling Fighting: 5 Ways to Teach Your Kids to Get Along *by Kim Abraham LMSW and Marney Studaker-Cordner LMSW***

We’ve all heard the following phrases from our kids: “Stop touching me!” “Give that back!” “Knock it off!” “MOM, he took my stuff!” “DAD, she won’t stay on her side of the car!” Sometimes it’s simply annoying and frustrating, like fingernails on a chalkboard. Other times, arguments cross the line into verbal and physical abuse. If you’re the parent of an oppositional, defiant child, you know that when they butt heads with brothers or sisters, they usually go “all in.” What starts as something minor quickly escalates to full-blown fighting and things can quickly get out of control. Parents often end up in the role of referee, just trying to regain peace in the home. In these cases you have things getting heated on both ends of the sibling rivalry: one child not willing to give up control or take responsibility and the other child who views him as a disruption to the family unit.

**Why Do Things Get So Heated With My Defiant Child?**

1. **Low frustration tolerance.** All kids have some difficulty tolerating frustration, particularly kids with Oppositional Defiant Disorder. These children will fight to gain control in any situation. The idea of giving in to another child—especially to a sibling—is unheard of in their minds.
2. **Feelings of resentment.** Siblings of ODD children are usually very aware of the level of stress in their home. Oppositional Defiant kids often deliberately annoy or aggravate others—sometimes because they are bored, feeling spiteful or feeling miserable themselves. They have difficulty accepting responsibility and tend to blame others for conflicts. This frustrates not only us as parents, but other children in the home as well. They can start to resent the ODD child, who they view as creating chaos and problems for others. It can leave the other kids in the family feeling hurt and angry. In these cases you have things getting heated on both ends of the sibling rivalry: one child not willing to give up control or take responsibility and the other child who views him as a disruption to the family unit.
3. **The Bill Cosby Factor.** In his stand-up routine, Bill Cosby shares how he handles sibling conflict in his home. He describes hearing his youngest child, who was around four years old at the time, yelling “MINE! MINE! MINE!” The comedian describes how he leaves the comfort of his couch to find his two daughters in a tug-of-war over a hairbrush, the older child saying, “No, give that back, it’s not yours!” Mr. Cosby, a loving parent, shouted, “Will you just give it to her?! Don’t you hear your little sister yelling?!” As the older child goes off crying about things being unfair, Mr. Cosby called out, “Hey, relax. She’s got stuff of mine, too!” He summarizes, “Parents are not interested in justice, they’re interested in quiet!”

The comedian’s story of intervening between his daughters is funny, in part because almost all of us can relate as parents. But which of us *isn’t* guilty of going to the child we *know* will be more likely to listen to us—more likely to put an end to the conflict—and trying to get her to resolve the issue with a sibling? Faced with two children—one who refuses to cope or negotiate or listen in any way, and one who has at least some age-appropriate skills—a parent is more likely to focus on the second child and ask her to “walk away” or handle things appropriately. This can also contribute to resentment on the part of that sibling, who has her own breaking point and will get tired of always being the one responsible for resolving the conflict.

**Sibling Fighting: How to Help Your Kids “Work It Out”**

The idea of allowing children to “work it out” during a conflict is that it teaches them how to resolve arguments or differences of opinion on their own. But when one of your children is Oppositional-Defiant, it changes things. If you’re the parent of an ODD kid, you’ve likely experienced the frustration that comes from trying to negotiate with that child. Siblings experience that very same frustration, but don’t yet have the skill set to effectively deal with the situation. They need you—the parent—to help them. Here are a few things you can do:

1. **Teach Your Children How to Avoid Negative Situations.** An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Walking away from a situation where your brother or sister is starting to get upset is one way of stopping a conflict before it begins. Help your kids identify situations where it’s best to “stop it before it even starts.” You might say, “What does Tim do when he’s starting to get in that angry mood?” Your other child might say, “His voice gets louder and he starts pointing at me.” You can then say, “When you see those warning signs, just walk away—nothing good is going to come of staying in there with him and trying to ‘win’ the fight.”
2. **Teach Your Children How to Recognize and Set Boundaries.** Let your child know that everyone has the right to their own physical and emotional space. If someone is deliberately provoking you with words or actions, you have the right to ask them to stop or to walk away. If that person follows you, they are crossing a boundary. Unfortunately, ODD kids tend to believe strongly in their own right to boundaries, but have little or no respect for the boundaries of others. This translates to statements like this: “I know I took your video game , but stay out of my room!” This can be extremely frustrating for siblings to deal with. If your child sets a boundary with a sibling and it’s not respected, that’s the time to come get you—the parent—for assistance and support in enforcing those boundaries.
3. **Praise Problem-Solving.** If one of your children does tend to be the one who walks away from fights or tries to negotiate with siblings rather than argue, make sure you recognize those attempts in a positive way. Learning to cope and problem solve is part of growing and maturing. Recognize that and praise any attempts either child makes to resolve a situation positively.
4. **Ensure Restitution.** If one of your children harms a sibling or takes something from them, make sure there is a consequence. For example, if Jake breaks Tyler’s game, he needs to pay for it. If he can’t pay for it, give him opportunities to earn the money from you to pay Tyler. Or, Jake may need to give something of his own, that he values, to Tyler. This accomplishes two things: Jake becomes the one who pays the price for *his own* actions (instead of Tyler) and Tyler learns there is justice in your home. Now, some parents may say, “Are you kidding?! If I took something that belonged to my ODD kid and gave it to his sibling, World War III would be declared!” But don’t allow your Oppositional Defiant child to hold family members hostage for fear of retaliation. In the real world, if your ODD child steals from or harms others, there’s restitution. If you decide the form of restitution we recommend would be hard to stick with or truly dangerous, identify another form of restitution that will fairly compensate the child who was wronged in the first place and then follow through.
5. **Be Proactive by Identifying Triggers.** Help your kids, particularly your ODD child, identify situations that seem to be particularly upsetting or that provoke an argument between siblings. Then help your children identify ways to cope with those situations or avoid them altogether. Show your ODD child how managing his anger or emotions actually gives him *more* control in a situation than by reacting to someone else.

**The Game of Life**

A family is like a sports team playing the game of life together. Not all the players get along. Not all the players like each other. But that’s not a ticket to be mean or disrespectful. Your role as a parent is to model good sportsmanship, teach skills and intervene when necessary. If one of the players fouls a teammate or refuses to follow the rules, your job as The Coach is to bench that child temporarily in a time out. (You can’t trade him to another team, no matter how much you may want to in the moment—and unfortunately The Coach isn’t allowed to hide out at the hot dog stand until the game is over!) Even though at times we need to be able to laugh at what feels like the absurdity of parenting, we *are* interested in justice as parents—but we’ll take the quiet whenever we can get it!