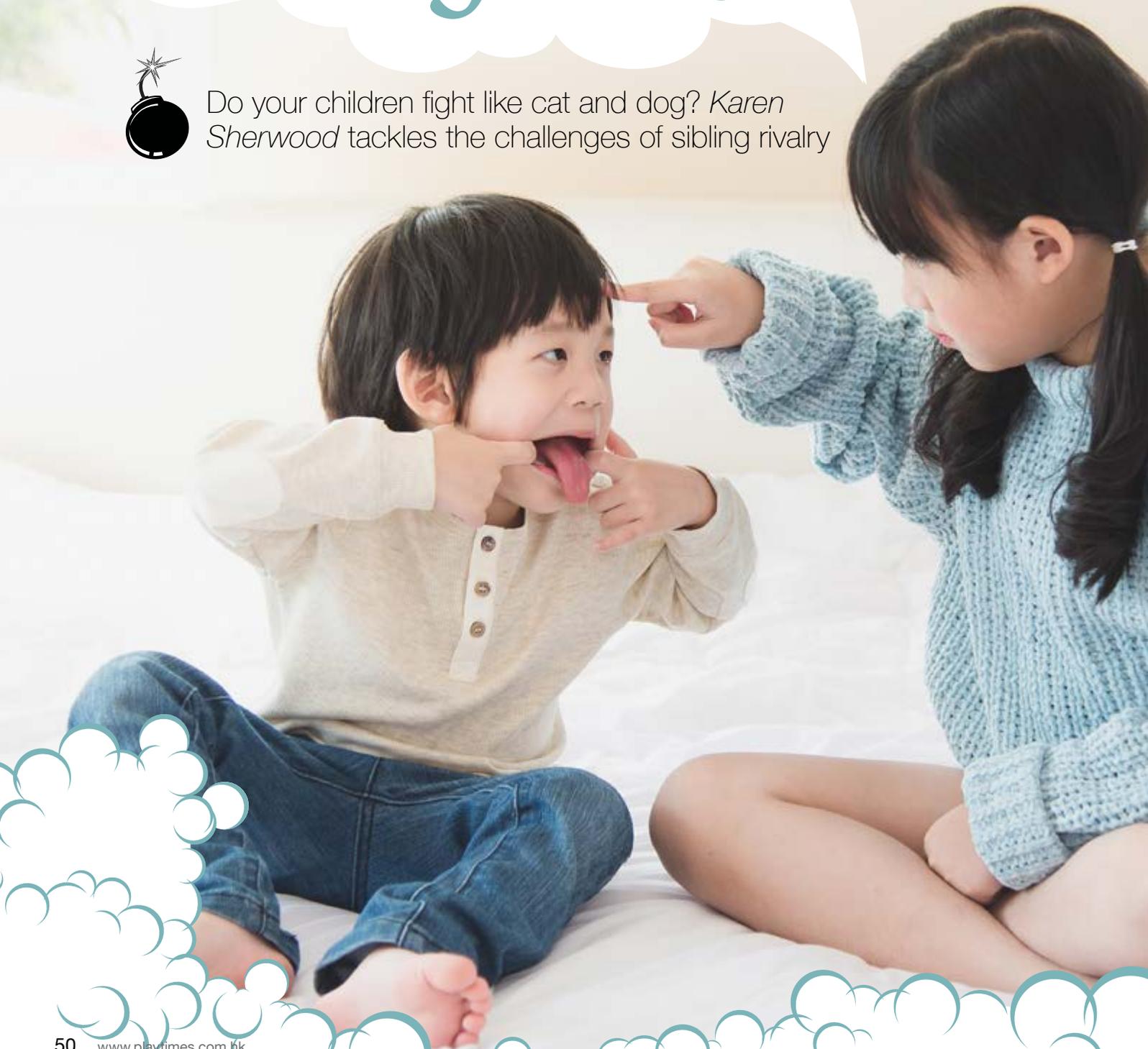
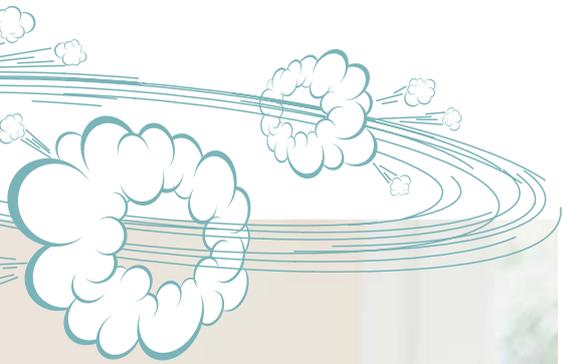


WHEN Siblings Fight



Do your children fight like cat and dog? *Karen Sherwood* tackles the challenges of sibling rivalry





Fledgling birds will often try to push the weakest siblings out of the nest. You'll find this fact totally unsurprising if you've ever watched your children trying to share a packet of sweets. Sibling rivalry is hardly a new phenomenon, but it's still one of the most talked-about aspects of parenting. So what can be done to make sibling conflict less regular, less damaging and, ultimately, less annoying for parents?

Sibling rivalry is caused, at its most basic level, by the competition for a scarce resource; namely, parental attention. Conflict is most pronounced where there are small (below two year) age gaps between siblings, but there are many other factors at play. Personality differences can lead to jealousy when children have different areas of expertise, particularly when one sibling has more qualities in common with a parent. Challenges are also increased when one child is gifted, or in families where a child requires additional attention due to illness or disability. Birth order, gender, and the number of siblings can also play a role. Sadly there is no magic formula that will guarantee harmony.

Reducing instances of conflict

So what can be done to reduce sibling tensions? Justine Campbell is a counselor, family life coach, and positive psychology practitioner with expertise across a range of areas, including sibling rivalry, anxiety and family conflict. Justine encourages families to "see themselves as a team, bringing different strengths to the table and working towards a common goal." She suggests that families discuss each other's strengths and qualities as a group to help reduce feelings of jealousy and build confidence.

Positive reinforcement of good behaviour can also work wonders on family relations. Too often, parents fall into the trap of only reacting to negative behaviour. Taking the time to regularly compliment children on things like playing an imaginative game or sharing toys nicely can fulfil their need for parental attention and prevent them acting out in a negative way to obtain it. Remember any attention is good attention to a child!

It's also important that everyone in your family (team!) has the chance to be heard. Justine suggests letting each child take a turn picking music in the



car, or selecting a movie or family meal. Letting all children have a say reduces any feelings of favouritism and helps children to appreciate their differences.

Another key strategy is ensuring each child gets one-on-one time with a parent. Lucy Nightingale is a qualified instructor in parent effectiveness training (P.E.T.), using methods devised by psychologist Dr Thomas Gordon to assist families to communicate more effectively. Lucy explains that, “a better and deeper connection with the parent diminishes sibling rivalry, because the scarce resource of your time and attention is no longer so scarce.” Justine agrees that this special time is really important. “It doesn’t need to be an overnight trip; just saying that you’re going to pick them up from school so you can have some time together can be enough.”

Lucy also suggests that helping children to enjoy each others’ company is vital. “Find activities they both enjoy doing or set up a project they can work on together – planning a family outing, decorating gran’s birthday card etc., then as much as possible leave them to it.” Lucy

believes a common mistake made by parents is to routinely separate children and set them up with activities independently. “This may work in the short term, but only to the detriment of the sibling bond.” To bolster this bond, Lucy also encourages families to “make it a nightly ritual for siblings to say goodnight and I love you to each other. You need to give siblings the chance to create strong bonds of love and friendship.”

The biggest no-no when it comes to siblings is comparison. Hands up if you are guilty of this one! Highlighting that one child is better at football than the other, or that one child is a more adventurous eater may seem harmless, but can add fuel to the sense of competition. “It’s hard, but we’ve got to be careful to see them as individuals and focus on their strengths and what they each bring to the team,” explains Justine. Think carefully about how you word compliments.

Managing conflicts when they arise

Unfortunately the first lesson for parents is acceptance. Believing that siblings should always get along is only going to lead to frustration. The second lesson

is a tough one too – you have to try to keep your cool and be the parent; don’t get drawn into shouting matches.

A particularly damaging mistake is “getting involved in conflicts in a way that causes children to feel parents are taking sides,” Lucy says. Rushing in when you don’t have all the facts can destroy your child’s trust in you – parents don’t always see what might have led up to a particular incident. “When you hear your child talking to a sibling in a way you do not like, or using physical force to get what they want, parents will often punish that child. This will only increase sibling rivalry and feelings of ill will.” Lucy points out that, “when a child comes to you with a complaint, often they are not looking for punishment for the perpetrator, just someone who will understand their upset that things have gone differently to how they pictured. Listen to your child’s hurt and reflect back how you think they are feeling, i.e. ‘Max said you couldn’t join in with the game. That’s hurt your feelings and you feel left out.’ Many times this understanding will be enough for the child to rush back to their game.”

“Kids are like sponges, they take it all in, so you’ve also got to be very conscious of what they watch on TV”

Justine's motto with children is that: “All feelings are OK, it’s what you do with them that matters.” Parents can’t just expect a child to change how they are feeling, no matter how irrational it may seem, any more than an adult can change their feelings on demand. Acknowledging what a child is feeling and helping younger children to name their feelings can sometimes be enough to calm things down. She recommends questions such as: ‘Can you help me understand how you feel?’ or ‘Can you help me understand what’s happening?’

Lucy encourages parents to “act as a mediator rather than a problem solver. Parents can help sibling interactions by phrasing each child’s grievances in a way that the other can hear the need and emotion rather than the blame or anger, i.e. ‘Jason you are sad because your sister knocked over your tower. You didn’t want her to do that.’ Once you have reflected back both children’s feelings and each child feels their message has been heard, the emotional temperature will come down, and parents can then ask the siblings if they have any ideas about solving the problem so that both children are happy.”

Both experts recommend that children are involved in finding solutions (once everyone has calmed down a

little!) and that it is important to separate the behaviour from the person. “Show them that sometimes people say or do things they don’t really mean. They might feel guilty because they did a bad thing, but what we don’t want is for them to feel that they are a bad person. There’s a big difference between shame and guilt,” Justine explains.

Modelling conflict resolution skills yourself is important too. When parents are debating weekend plans or discussing what they would each prefer for dinner it can provide clues for children on how to resolve a difference of opinion. “Children see, children do,” says Justine, “I’ll talk openly, in kid-friendly terms, when I have a conflict and how I resolved that.” Reading books about feelings or discussing how characters in films are managing their emotions is useful too. “Kids are like sponges, they take it all in, so you’ve also got to be very conscious of what they watch on TV,” she says.

Getting help

Sibling rivalry is utterly normal. It becomes a problem when an issue or a behaviour is impacting on the well-being of the family, or of an individual. Sibling relationship problems can continue into adulthood, so there’s no shame in seeking guidance from a professional.

Benefits

It may be hard to see much benefit when your children are hurling shoes at each other, but there are many advantages to growing up with siblings. “There aren’t too many jobs in the world where you can avoid interacting with people,” Justine explains, “so it’s really important for children to learn how to share and how to get along with others.” Learning to recognise strengths and differences in other people is an important life skill, as is the need for compromise. Sibling relationships, though complicated, do provide a wonderful practice ground for the challenges that kids will face in the ‘real world.’ Ultimately, all kids have to learn that there’s a lot of real-world truth in that eye-rolling sibling catchphrase “It’s not fair!” Who better to learn from than a conveniently located sibling? 

Justine Campbell works with individuals of all ages at the Blurton Family Development Centre and Mindquest Group in Hong Kong.
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Lucy Nightingale runs regular P.E.T. courses for parents in Sai Kung. Courses in other locations can be found at **www.gordonparenting.com**.
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