

Oh, the Things You Can Learn Just Being in a Family!

Sociologists tell us that families are a “primary socializing system”. I think that’s an academic way of saying families are the place where children first learn and continue to learn about how to “be” in this world. It’s the first place children learn about love, caring and conflict, respect and responsibility, love of learning and personal power – all those skills and values, those internal assets, we want our children to develop as they grow and mature.

Just living in a family can teach children a great deal, but as we all know, we sometimes inadvertently teach “the bad and the ugly” along with “the good”. We sometimes teach lessons that don’t truly reflect our values, or the values we want our children to develop. It may be helpful to take the time to reflect on our own values and how we deliberately weave them into our parenting, both in what we say and perhaps more importantly what we do.

So, let’s say your two children are arguing over whose turn it is to use the computer or some other valued family possession. You are trying hard to think of this annoying squabble as an opportunity to teach conflict resolution, empathy, caring, respect etc. etc. The argument is getting louder and louder – what can you do? If you haven’t had time to think through what needs to be considered and given those considerations, what actions need to be taken, you may just jump-in - if only to stop the noise! And we usually can stop the noise one way or another, but in just reacting, we may not use this opportunity to our own or our children’s (child’s) best advantage.

As parents, we’re all confronted with many, many opportunities to teach peaceful conflict resolution, caring, and respect. If you have more than one child, those teaching opportunities may be down-right overwhelming! And feeling over-whelmed can really drag a family down. So, without being too Pollyanna-ish, let’s try to re-frame those everyday sibling interactions as great opportunities to learn about how to be caring and responsible and tolerant and honest. If you have one child, you have similar opportunities; they just arise with extended family and friends, instead of siblings.

Back to the two children squabbling over the computer (the TV, the remote, the Legoes, the best chair – take your pick!). What needs to be considered before you take any action?

There are lots of things to consider, but one of the most important is your child’s personal development. We all know that human development affects behavior. A six year old and a three year old usually have pretty limited verbal skills. Their ability to negotiate and compromise is also limited. Chances are they are going to need your help in settling disagreements. Even though your young child knows, in your family, there is no place for physical fighting, her limited verbal skills may make a physical response seem like the only strategy available to her. Prevention is a powerful tool. Don’t wait until fists are flying. When voices get louder and louder, go and calmly ask what their problem seems to be. Having young children express verbally their perception of what happened is good

practice. Probably, the 6 year old will make the best case, so you can then model good listening skills by listening respectfully to your three year old too. By acknowledging that the squabble is their problem and that all conflicts have two sides, you're modeling good conflict resolution skills as well as respect for others. Ask the children if they have an idea for a solution to this conflict. They may need your help with suggestions for possible solutions. But the more you personally can avoid making the ultimate decision to resolve the conflict, the better off things will be. In asking them to solve their own conflicts, you're teaching respect and caring and letting your children know you have every confidence in their ability to make good decisions. They may have a great idea, or they may have no idea. What matters is, in asking them to try to settle their dispute, you set an expectation that people, including children, can settle their inevitable disagreements in a respectful and caring way.

A 10 year old and a 13 year old should be far more able to work-out their own differences. After all, you've been teaching them the necessary skills and values since they were little. You've set that expectation and modeled for them that people in your family settle conflicts respectfully and with care. Over time and with practice, your children have developed reasonable verbal skills and more ability to negotiate and compromise. You have been clear there is no physical fighting allowed. When conflicts arise, let your children try to settle their differences, being clear that you are confident they can work this out. (They may need a reminder about your very high expectations for them.) If the noise is escalating, calmly enter the room and quietly ask what their plan is to settle their conflict. Remind them that the TV, computer or whatever is causing the conflict needs to be turned-off/removed while they settle their differences. With older children whose conflict is simply that they both want the same thing at the same time, you really don't need to hear both sides. This is not a philosophical issue. You just need to hear the plan. They may make a plan they can both agree to - "You can use it now, I have it after dinner" - or they may just decide to move-on, demonstrating perhaps they want your attention more than they want whatever they are arguing about. Either way, they've settled their differences and learned in the process.

Conflict is inevitable, but it should not be continual. If you think your children are fighting much too much, they probably are. Most kids will express their feelings of unhappiness, frustration, or powerlessness in the place they feel safest and most loved and that would be home. If your children or one child seems to be arguing and fighting a lot, there is a reason. It could be problems with school, or friends or with a particular sibling. Once the child is able to talk about the underlying problem, your family can focus all their caring and love toward solving that problem. The little everyday conflicts should diminish.

Imagine a world where we all solve our inevitable conflicts carefully and respectfully. It can happen –one family at a time.

