

Pay attention to the hurt, not the hurter

In most sibling fights, parents see a perpetrator and a victim. Often the perpetrator is the same again and again, but often they take turns. How a parent reacts to the fighting is based on the perception of the fight—who did what to whom, what I think about that (she's so mean, he should know better, she always gives in, he's such a bully, etc.), my subconscious identification with one or the other based on my relationship with my siblings, unrealistic expectations of how my children *should* treat each other, etc. Parent's reactions provoke children's behavior just as much as their sibling does.

Our children are naturally impulsive, especially young children, and they are going to get mad at each other and hit or push—it's simply part of living in a family. A certain amount can be overlooked but hard hitting and angry retaliations need to be addressed, and the anger, resentment, or jealousy beneath the behavior must be dug out, understood and redirected in order to put an end to the fighting. Punishment, yelling, looking only at the behavior does not end it.

Blame is the culprit. Think about it. How do you feel when you are blamed for anything? You get defensive—either by withdrawing in guilt and resentment, blaming someone else or storing up angry feelings. That's what our children do. But when we are left only with the natural consequence of our actions, we are more likely to feel remorse and even make amends.

The next time one of your children hurts another, try a new response. Pay attention to the hurt, not the hurter. Go directly to the child who is hurt and ask about the hurt. If he says, "Sammy hit me," respond only with, "That must really hurt. Let me kiss it." Ignore Sammy—do not even mention his name—until the hurt is comforted. Sammy will likely be watching and wondering why you aren't mad at him. He may run off to slowly return when you don't yell for him to come back. If he's watching, then say, "Sammy would you like to get a cold cloth to hold on your brother's arm?" If he says no or doesn't respond, get it yourself with no more attention to Sammy. It may take a few times before it works. It may get worse, because Sammy will test you. Stay consistent. If there's not an obvious hurt, address what they need to work out their problem. Acknowledge the problem with no blame to either child.

One mother, who's been trying this method consistently even after things initially got worse, had victory. She and her three children had been bike riding. Her five-year-old daughter Sarah, who had been the one to always feel her mother's blame, suddenly grabbed her two-year-old brother's helmet (still on his head) and started shaking it rather violently causing him to cry. This mother went to Ben and comforted him, noticing that Sarah had gone over to sit on a rock. After Ben was ready to move on, she attended to her baby, still not responding to Sarah. From a distance, she heard Sarah call Ben over to the rock and say, "I'm sorry that I hurt you." Then she gave him a big hug. They played happily the rest of the day. In another incident at home, when Ben was physically hurt, this mother asked Sarah if she wanted to get a cold cloth. Sarah quickly did and held it on the wound. Their fighting has significantly decreased.

After the event is over, particularly after *your* emotions have calmed, go to the hitter and say, "You must have been really angry at your brother to hit him like that (addressing the emotion, not the behavior). He must have done something that got you really upset." Allow her to get out all her anger and blame, validating how she must have felt. Sarah told her mother that she felt like the devil and her two siblings were angels. Then add, "I know you know it's not okay to hit, so what would be helpful to you next time you feel so upset so that you don't need to hit?" Sarah came up with running into the next room and taking a deep breath. Some children want to go to the parent to tell how they feel but will only do this if they trust they will not be blamed. When you address the child's emotion that led to the hit, you connect and your child will feel understood. I have heard many success stories with this turn around.

Remember that what you see is never the whole picture. Many so-called innocent victims have learned how to push their siblings buttons to provoke a physical reaction in order to get that child in trouble. So stay objective and don't make assumptions or judgment calls. Children are quite capable of apologizing or making reparation when they are not forced to do so. When they feel blamed, they are left with no choice but defending themselves, especially when they feel the judgment is unfair.