

Sharing in 7 Simple Steps

What can you do to encourage good and lasting relationships between your children? **KAREN DOHERTY**, co-author of a new book on sibling rivalry, says getting off to the right start is key.

My cousins from outside Dublin were a huge inspiration behind writing *Sibling Rivalry – Seven Simple Solutions*. Somehow Auntie Rose and Uncle Peter were able to raise a family of ten children – including his first three, whose mother had died, and seven of their own – who support each other through thick and thin. Now they're older, they share apartments and go on holidays *en famille*. Their relationships aren't always idyllic; I've heard them poke fun at each others' weak spots. But their underlying support for one another is undeniable.

They proved to me that it really is possible for siblings to get on. So, for years I've been asking them, "What was your parents' secret? How did your mother do it? Why do you all get along so well?"

The vast majority of adults interviewed for the book don't get on as well with their siblings. Many are distant, some

are competitive and others freeze each other out completely. But, what they all had in common was that they wanted their children to get on better. I was also determined that my own – I had four children in five years – would get on better than I did with my brother and sister.

My older brother, Jon, teased me incessantly and gave me a constant stream of wedgies and dead legs. One summer he pushed my arm out from under me when I was doing a handstand and I came down on my knuckles and gave myself a black eye. A couple of weeks later he punched me in the mouth and chipped my tooth. My younger sister, Laura, was the pampered princess, the apple of my mother's eye. I felt more like an Amazonian reject. So, instead of always feeling the gooseberry, I froze Laura out completely and had almost no relationship with her.

I wanted more for my children; for them to stop bickering, keep jealousy and resentment to a minimum and

to have strong lifelong relationships. So with my cousins' family in mind, I persevered. I spoke to hundreds of parents, psychologists, teachers and even doctors, who all had conflicting views, and realised there is no one right answer. We all handle sibling rivalry differently depending on our own personalities, our children's characters and the circumstances.

However, there are seven simple things you can do that will make an enormous difference. Rivalries often start from the very beginning. These strategies will help you to ensure a smooth transition when you welcome a new baby into the family. They'll also help to reduce jealousy that can build up when you have to spend a lot of time with the baby. They'll even help to minimise anger and frustration when your younger child starts playing with your older child's toys and he refuses to share.

HELPING YOUR CHILDREN TO LEARN TO SHARE

1 Try being a **Pause Parent** and keep it in perspective

Sharing doesn't come naturally to most children. It has to be learned and it can take a while to sink in. It's worth remembering this when the baby helps herself to one of your older child's toys and he gets angry. Don't worry that he's a selfish bully who will come to no good. He simply hasn't understood yet that he can't have everything all the time. By staying calm and not over-reacting, you can teach him to share in a kinder, more supportive way.

2 Try being a **Cheerleader Parent** and praise your children

Little children absolutely love praise, so keep your eyes open for anything that looks even vaguely like sharing and compliment them for it. Notice the one time your child does let his sister play with his toy. Tell him how kind he is and how pleased you are. If he has a sense of himself as someone who's good at sharing, there's every chance he'll want to do it again. Also, remember to praise your younger child when she shares a biscuit

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with her big brother. It's important that she sees herself as someone who's good at sharing too.

3 Try being a **Sorted Parent** and get one step ahead

When a tricky situation starts to develop and they both want the same toy, try reassuring each of them that they'll get a chance to play with it. Tell them that whoever has the toy can have it for five more minutes, and then the other one gets a go for five minutes. Even if they can't tell time, this system can work incredibly well. You'll find they'll often get bored of it before the five minutes is up and hand it over anyway.

4 Try being a **Commando Parent** and be in charge

So what do you do when he snatches the toy back off her? Try being a Commando Parent; they have natural authority. Act fast – tell him nicely that he will have to wait his turn. Then take the toy away from him and hand it back to his sister. The trick is to be firm without getting angry or emotional. If you can achieve this without getting exasperated, your children will feel safe and secure knowing that you're in charge and there are certain rules everyone has to obey.

5 Try being a **Tuned-In Parent** and listen

Learning to share is hard. So soften the blow by acknowledging you understand how he feels. This means listening and being sympathetic while he vents his frustrations about having to let his sister play with his things. Once he feels understood, he's far less likely to be resentful and angry at her.

It can go against all of your natural instincts not to interrupt if he starts saying horrible things, like how much he hates her or that he wishes she'd never been

born. But think of it as letting the steam out of a pressure cooker. Once he's released his unhappy, angry feelings, he's less likely to be jealous or unkind and more likely to share.

6 Try being a **Physical Parent** and look for physical causes

A child who is over-tired, wound up on too much junk food or has been cooped up in the house all day is likely to be ratty, so it's no surprise if he gets nasty. You'll often find all it takes to keep a pleasant atmosphere in the house and ensure your children feel like sharing is a proper night's sleep, good food and a run around the park.

7 Try being a **Laid-Back Parent** and allow them to do more

Part of helping children to get on well is realising you won't always have to solve their every problem. In time your child will start sharing of his own accord and you'll be able to smile to yourself. You'll start feeling more confident about allowing them to play together without you having to hover over them to ensure a fight doesn't ensue, and you'll know you've helped them to develop a better relationship. As your children get older, these seven simple solutions will continue to help. You'll find you can put an end to their arguments, resolve all sorts of festering long-term issues, and prevent jealousy, competitiveness and resentment from building up so you can all live more harmoniously.



Sibling Rivalry – Seven Simple Solutions by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge, Bantam Press, £12.99. For more information visit www.karenandgeorgia.com.

