

# Catholic Parenting 101

## Dealing with Sibling Rivalry

Timothy Hogan, Psy.D., LP, CIRT

Families that have more than one child will inevitably notice some degree of tension and conflict. Siblings naturally compete with one another for limited resources, including food, toys, and time with parents. The degree to which this competition becomes a problem usually depends upon the actions taken by the parents.

Parents can best deal with sibling rivalry by cultivating an atmosphere of compassionate teamwork for the whole family. Parents can maximize this opportunity by applying these seven tips.

- 1. Anticipate and prepare.** Many situations contribute to the onset of sibling rivalry, such as a new family member. If there is a birth or adoption of a child, parents can prevent or reduce potential sibling rivalry by preparing the entire family for the new family member. For example, explain your child's new and essential role as the baby's big brother or big sister. Find ways to include every family member in the raising of the new baby.
- 2. Start each day on the right foot.** Start each day by spending time with the child who feels neglected. This creates an emotional momentum that can encourage cooperation for the rest of the day.
- 3. Set limits and teach boundaries.** Children need clear direction about what is acceptable, such as "Use your words, not your hands" or "It's OK to be angry, but you may not call each other names." When these limits are crossed, provide appropriate consequences as consistently as you can.
- 4. Promote empathy.** When dealing with a conflict between siblings, do what you can to promote empathy. Take the time to listen to both sides, showing empathy to both children.

As you model loving and serving all children, encourage them to love and serve each other in the same way. Children will model the behavior of their parents with each other—both good and bad behaviors.

- 5. Promote individuality, not fairness.** Parents can put too much pressure on themselves trying to treat each child the same every day. This seems like the fair thing to do, but it rarely works. Each child is unique and needs different things on different days. Instead, focus on giving each child what he or she needs on a day-to-day basis.
- 6. Empower siblings.** Let your children know that you would prefer to have them work out their conflicts on their own. When you are compelled to resolve conflicts between siblings, teach them that your resolution may not be as well-received as their resolution. This will motivate them next time to come to agreement without you.
- 7. Expect teamwork.** Notice when siblings are working cooperatively and be sure to reinforce it. When possible help siblings see how all family members have their own interests and strengths. Encourage children to give each other positive feedback on areas of their siblings' strength.

Parents have tremendous ability to prevent and minimize the negative impact of sibling rivalry. In so doing, they can help siblings create loving bonds that will last a lifetime.



© EvgeniyShkolenko/Getty