

The Race Is On!

A Cooperative Game for Reducing Sibling Aggression

By Kristin E. Robinson, Ph.D.



"Mommmyyyy! Joey hit me!"

Teasing, arguing and physical aggression are typical among most children, and especially between siblings, given the amount of time spent together. One group of researchers found that parents must cope with an average of eight conflicts between siblings per hour (Dunn & Munn, 1986). Children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) in particular, face challenges when dealing with peers, and may need extra help in developing social skills. Impulse control, for example, is imperative to developing peer relationships. The child with AD/HD may not have the patience to wait her turn, and impulsivity may result in physical aggression. Children with AD/HD may also need help in identifying their own emotions and recognizing the emotions of others. These social skills develop through hundreds of daily interactions with others, especially siblings.

Why Do Children Fight?

Conflict among siblings is not unique to humans – it happens in every species. Young animals learn to hunt through play with siblings. Humans are social animals and begin learning the process of acquiring and sharing resources with others through trial and error with peers and most often with siblings. Children argue for a variety of reasons: to use a toy, wear a shared item of clothing, sit next to mom or just to be "right." These daily competitions are opportunities to learn important social skills: communication, negotiation, sharing and impulse control. Sometimes, these lessons can become too competitive, even aggressive, when siblings disagree.

What You Can Do

When sibling squabbles escalate to potentially harmful, physically abusive levels, parents are faced with a dilemma: What is the best course of action? Some have suggested parents ignore sibling conflicts and allow children to work it out themselves, with the exception of physical aggression. But research shows that untreated aggression will persist. Nonintervention can even promote learned helplessness in a younger, smaller or less competent child. On the other hand, harsh punishment (e.g., spanking) and inconsistent punishment (e.g., usually punishing the older or larger child) results in increased rates of aggression. The strongest evidence suggests that parents should intervene by teaching social skills. An effective program includes a combination of clear family rules against physical aggression; consistent, mild discipline for aggression (e.g., time out or loss of a privilege); and consistent reinforcement of appropriate coping behaviors.

Stay C.A.L.M.

Check-in often. Use daily conflicts as opportunities to teach the verbal expression of feelings. Sometimes kids act out physically when they don't know how to express their

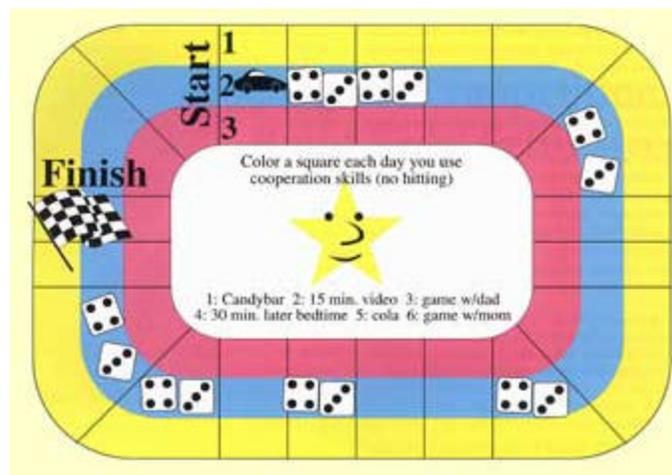
frustrations verbally. Hold weekly meetings to discuss family expectations and specific cooperation skills.

Acknowledge appropriate behaviors. Label the behaviors you like. For example, "Sam, I like the way you didn't argue when I asked you to share with your sister." Reinforce social skills immediately and consistently: "Suzy, I just noticed how patiently you waited for your sister to finish playing the video game before you took your turn."

Link skills to feelings. Help children develop new coping strategies for different situations. "Do you feel ____ (irritated, frustrated, tired of waiting)? What could you do to feel better?" There are many books devoted to helping teach kids important social skills, such as impulse control, anger management and expressing feelings. A few of these are: *Helping Kids Handle Anger*, *Skillstreaming the Preschool Child* and *Skillstreaming the Elementary Child*.

Manage the environment to reduce conflicts. Clear, consistent house rules are important. Some examples are: ask before borrowing things, knock before entering and no physical aggression. Post a schedule and use a timer for activities such as video games and shared toys. Put toys in "time-out" for 24 hours if children fight over them.

If staying **C.A.L.M.** alone is not enough, you may want to consider creating a behavior contract. A behavior contract includes an observable, measurable behavior goal, and a reward for its completion. The reward may be a fixed reward. For example, for every day Jacob completes his homework by 5:00 p.m., he can stay up 30 minutes past his bedtime that evening. However, rewards that are delivered in a random fashion keep children interested longer. For example, Jacob would earn a roll of the dice by completing his homework. Each number rolled represents a different reinforcer – and some numbers could even represent a verbal reward like, "Good luck next time!"



A Racetrack Game for Cooperation

The racetrack game is a type of behavior contract. It presents a very specific goal of "no physical aggression," which can later be expanded to include verbal arguing and teasing. The Racetrack Behavior Chart example (Figure 1) has a separate track for each child and a fixed number of boxes, each representing a day. Children are assigned a track and are permitted to color a square for each day they have no incidents involving physical aggression. Some of the boxes are labeled with dice, with each number on the die

representing a small reinforcer. Upon landing on a box with a dice figure, children are allowed one turn at a single roll for a chance to win a small reinforcer, such as a piece of candy or a special treat. When all children have colored the last square, a slightly larger group reinforcer is earned, such as a pizza dinner or video party. When displayed prominently (the refrigerator door), the chart helps remind children of their goals and shows progress over time. Add your own variations to make the chart work with your family. For example, instead of assigning each child a track, color squares only for the days that all children have had no aggression in order to further support the idea of cooperation.

Sibling rivalry is a natural process children experience in developing social skills. However, if rivalry reaches harmful levels, parents must intervene. Clear family rules, and consistent reinforcement of appropriate behavior can help children learn important social skills. A behavior chart, like the racetrack example presented here, may help children focus on the goal of getting along with others. A

Kristin E. Robinson, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist. She serves as the assistant director of the Child's Behavior Therapy

Unit at Valley Mental Health and teaches at the University of Utah in

Salt Lake City, Utah. She can be reached at krisr@vmh.com or

(801) 581-0194.

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Schacter, F.F., & Stone, R.K. (1987). Comparing and contrasting siblings: defining the self. *Journal of Children in Contemporary Society*, 19 (Spring/Summer), 55-75. Figure 1:
Racetrack Chart