

Why Your Kids Fight (It's Not What You Think)

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SUMMARY

In this episode of the Your Parenting Mojo podcast, the host discusses sibling fighting with parent Stacy, who has a 12-year-old and a 7-year-old constantly bickering and lying to each other. The conversation explores the underlying reasons for sibling conflict, emphasizing that such disputes often stem from a desire for connection rather than defiance, and offers strategies for parents to help their children resolve conflicts independently.

- *Sibling fighting often arises from a need for connection rather than meanness or defiance.*
- *Children may use negative behaviors, like hitting, as bids for attention or connection.*
- *Parents can help children learn to express their needs and resolve conflicts by teaching them to communicate effectively.*
- *Special one-on-one time with each child can strengthen connections and reduce rivalry.*
- *Introducing language around feelings and needs can empower children to articulate their emotions and desires.*
- *Parents are encouraged to model conflict resolution skills in low-stakes situations before applying them to sibling disputes.*
- *Establishing a calm-down routine can help children regulate their emotions before discussing conflicts.*
- *Creative scheduling can help parents meet their own needs while ensuring quality time with each child.*

Hello and welcome to the Your Parenting Mojo podcast. Are your kids fighting over every little thing? The same toy, whose turn it is, who had what first. And then when you try to help, is someone lying about what actually happened? Today's coaching call is about sibling fighting, but even if you only have one child, stay with me the strategies we're using work for any conflict between kids, whether that's siblings, cousins, or friends. In this call, you'll hear from parent Stacy, who has a 12-year-old and a 7-year-old, and they are constantly poking, teasing, and fighting with each other.

And what's even more frustrating is both kids have admitted they sometimes lie about what happened because they want to get the other one in trouble. Does that sound like anything you're dealing with? If so, this is probably not the relationship you want your kids to have. And you might also feel worried about what this means for what their relationship will be like as adults. And when your role shift from you caring for them to them caring for you.

What you're going to learn in this episode is why kids fight in the first place. And spoiler alert, one of the reasons is it's usually about connection. Even though that may be not make any sense at all right now. You're going to hear how to help kids make bids for each other's attention in ways that actually work instead of ending in hitting. And you'll learn how to teach kids how to solve their own conflict without you having to referee every single disagreement.

If you want to bring your own parenting question to a call like this one, you can sign up for free at your parentingmojo.com/beyondthebehavior. Then join me between 9:00 and 10:30 a.m. Pacific on the second Wednesday of the month so you can talk with me directly about whatever is challenging you right now and get the support you need to be with your kids in a way that's aligned with your values. So let's hear from Stacy about the sibling fighting situation. I just found your link the other day and decided to look you up and worked worked out well you had a call coming up so um thanks for providing this um so we uh we've had multiple talks with our kids um you know the oldest likes to poke and fight and tease um and the other one the younger one is sort of learning that behavior back um and I feel like a little bit it's uh karma because I definitely was teasing my older brother or a younger brother when I was a kid um and so I I know a lot of this behavior is normal but we're getting to the point where we're like just kind of wanting to take a step back and let them figure it out themselves because nothing that we say is really working and when we do try to intervene or help them um someone or maybe both of them is always lying and they've even now admitted to yeah I sometimes tell you something different has happened because I want to get her in trouble or she wants to get me in trouble so she's lying and I don't know it's it's like impossible I feel like um to help them with each little thing and it's usually over something really dumb um or simple you know um and so it's just it it just gets really old and it feels like we're talking about it every couple of days like trying to like okay you got you know we just want to take a step back and let them figure it out but it doesn't always work or I don't know I mean sometimes they actually hurt each other and so Okay. How long has this been going on?

um I mean their whole life really but >> [laughter] >> I mean not not exactly but um I feel like it's gotten worse in the last 6 months or so I feel like the 7-year-old has learned more of the like I think the older one was lying for a while like or you know stretching the truth or whatever um and I know some of that can be normal too um but uh I feel like the 7-year-old has recently or in the last 6 months to a year maybe started lying also and so I just feel like the dynamic has gotten harder to like help them through or Yeah. Okay. Any major changes?

um in their life in that period? No no I've been a stay-at-home mom the whole time um fortunately but um yeah I mean nothing nothing has really changed significantly. I'm talking about going back to work but and I don't think I don't think that's enough to cause behavior changes but Okay. And like they know I'm looking for work but I don't I can't think of any others. Okay. Okay. >> What kinds of things seem to incite it? Do you Do you see any patterns in times of day that this comes up or issues that they're fighting about?

um it often starts with an a thing that like no this was mine no it was mine but but you gave it to me and you know it's like disagreement or or not remembering whose thing was what so it's often over a thing um and sometimes it's just I think attention honestly I think I don't know if they're looking for attention from each other the youngest especially I think um she I know she likes uh to have time with her sister but but the other one is getting older and and not as interested always um they still play together really well sometimes but not always >> [laughter] >> Yeah. I think I think attention is is one of it and I think it's it both ways actually Yeah. I I think you're right on the money there and attention sort of has this negative connotation in our culture right you're attention-seeking and so I try and reframe that as connection you're looking for connection because that doesn't have the same sort of aftertaste >> [laughter] >> that attention seems to have and I I I think your hypothesis is a good one and the reason for that is twofold firstly my hypothesis would be when you see or hear them hitting each other fighting you probably step toward them is that right?

Yeah I mean I've I've started to to not do that as much as I kind of like let them try to figure it out a little bit before I intervene um again because it doesn't seem to make a difference when I do or they don't they don't necessarily stop when we tell them to stop so Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So so it could be connection with you and then yes also definitely looking for connection with each other and as bizarre as that sounds right it's super super common for kids to make a bid for connection with another kid by hitting them.

Because they don't know how to ask they don't know how to say will you play with me and for some reason they think hitting is a way to do that. Sometimes kids are really into roughhousing and so then you can see the logical leap that's happened of okay we want to roughhouse and so I'm going to hit you to tell you to play. Um but but sometimes it's just the best way they know to get somebody's attention to say hey I want to play with you.

And so in that case what we can do is support them in making bids for connection that the other person is actually willing to receive >> [laughter] >> So we can we can support them in saying hey do you want to play X or do you want to play X or Y right? So the the the person who's making the bid is making it in a way that the other person can receive and then we can also support the receiver in saying yes or yes I'm willing to play but not that game or I'm I don't want to play right now but I will play in half an hour or I don't want to play right now and I don't know when I will want to play right? So we can sort of help them to have those interactions in a way that doesn't mean that they fight to try to to make that bid for for each other's connection.

What do you think about that? Yeah I think I think that's worth a try at least um yeah I think I think the youngest especially might might hear or understand that Yeah. Okay. Okay. And then sort of on the the parental connection piece you you might predict my next question. How is your special time >> [laughter] >> with each of them? um so I mean since the the youngest was born we've been like we need to make more one-on-one time with the older one um you know and it like all along we've known this um but again like the younger one has demands and so it's just it's it's hard um my so my old where where things have gone now and it now now then it becomes a rift between my husband and I. So we take turns doing bedtime and when it's my turn to do bedtime I end up taking quite a while because like the the 12-year-old like wants to talk and she want you know like so that is our special connection time but I end up spending like an hour in her room and and sometimes you know things have gotten later and later so now she's going to bed maybe later than she should and then we are going to bed later than we should and so um I feel like we're making that connection time but it's then it's now straining on my husband and I's relationship and our sleep um and so and then the little one I guess I mean she enjoys the bedtime stuff too but she she often wants to snuggle and I I think I do give her more time in the day because she she asks for it more and the older one I think doesn't doesn't really let me in until we're in the you know in her room and doing that bedtime Yeah and alone right? You're probably not with the younger one.

Right cuz she's in bed. Yeah. >> Yeah. Yeah. So the older one then gets you your dedicated attention. Yeah and I actually feel like we've we've connected more recently like she's starting to go through puberty and stuff so I feel like she's you know open to me and asking lots of questions and things and I feel like that's kind of actually helped us connect more recently um that I'm I'm grateful that she you know is having those conversations and stuff but um again that the timing is is tricky um and I I don't know and she's she's in sports and stuff too now so

she's going to have late practices and things that you know, that's just going to make it even later probably or harder to to take to give that time.

Right. Yeah. And so So So we want to be thinking about well, what are the options that we have in our schedule to be able to move pieces around to to sort of have these things happen that are so meaningful and supportive of our relationship, right? And so bedtime has sort of become this this time when when you're able to have that connection because little one isn't around and sort of it has worked up to this point for you to some extent. And so what we're looking at is well, does it have to happen at bedtime? Could we carve out some other time in the day when little one isn't around? Or does connection with partner have to happen in the evening? Could you do breakfast together or something like that? Um it How How are your needs for rest and self-care and all the other things that are important to you fitting into this arrangement? And if they are, awesome, right? And if they're not, then we're looking at okay, yes, I am a person who has needs for rest, self-care, and other things. And I want to make sure that I get those met and also that I help you to meet your need for connection. So what are some ways that we can meet both of those needs is essentially what we're going for.

And so we're looking at timing at you know, it's possible I Are you driving her to sports practice? Uh sometimes, yeah. Is little one in the car when you're driving? Not usually. Okay. So potential there for one-on-one time, possibly? It could replace some of the time that's happening at the end of the day. So So we're looking as creatively as we can at the whole picture to say, what are my needs in the situation and what are your needs in the situation and what are all the strategies we could use to help us to meet those needs?

Yeah. Yeah. And I think that that also starts to get to your wondering well, do I step in and help them? Do I let them figure it out? The piece that I'm hearing that's missing right now is a real understanding of what needs are coming up for each person in the interactions that they're having. And if you start to use this language of feelings and needs with each of the kids, you might be surprised at how soon they start using it with each other.

>> [laughter] >> Um in terms of stepping back right now, I would hesitate to do that because they don't currently have the tools to be able to address it themselves. It's just well, am I actually contributing anything that's helping? I don't know. So maybe I shouldn't step back or I shouldn't step in, but there there's there's nothing that's going to change about their capacity to be able to understand and resolve this conflict unless we support them in developing those skills. And so the most effective way of doing that is when you're I mean even as simple as how do we figure out bedtime at a time that actually works for everybody? If you're sort of taking that extra step to say, what are your needs in this situation cuz they're so important to me and I want to make sure those get met. And here are my needs in this situation and those are important, too. And what are what are at least 10 strategies we can think of that would help us to meet both of our needs?

That's real conflict resolution, right? And that's not just hey, you're going to learn how to resolve conflict between you. This is embodied practice between you and each of the kids. And I've seen parents of 5-year-old and 3-year-old who then very quickly start to say, hey, what what's going on with you? What's your need? Are you Are you Are you drawing on my picture because you have a need for connection right now? Let's go play and then we'll come back together and and draw together next to each other, right? 5-year-old and 3-year-old.

>> [laughter] >> So and this is within weeks of starting to have conversations about feelings and needs between parent and child. So it really can happen quite fast. Great. Yeah, when you were talking with that about the 3-year-old, I thought I thought of my 7-year-old. Even even the pictures I think might help. My My oldest hates when we start talking about feelings. And the youngest, she's she's kind of introvert. I She's very quirky. But she like getting her to talk sometimes is really hard. Like when she's upset, she's just shut down.

And so I think maybe even having pictures that she could point to actually might still be useful, yeah. Yes. Yeah. And so a couple other things to try with kids who who don't speak, who can't speak, who won't speak, right? You can have the sort of the conversation by yourself. So you can say something like hey, I'm noticing that you seem really frustrated right now and I'm wondering if you have a need for autonomy cuz you really wanted to make that decision. And you're looking for any sort of verbal or non-verbal communication. We're not requiring that kids say yes, mom, I have a need for autonomy. The If they If they grunt, right? If they turn toward us. If they just continue making eye contact, that's some indication that yes, they're in this conversation, you're on the right track. Um any sort of turning away, any disengagement is no, that's not it.

Um and then and then you're sharing what's going on for you. Yeah, I was feeling really overwhelmed cuz it was so loud in here. I have a need for calm and ease right now. And I'm wondering, how can we meet How can we find a strategy that meets both of our needs in this situation? If you have a need for this and I have a need for that, what if we try X or maybe Y could work, right? And again, you're sort of looking for yes, I want to do one of those things. Um and so this can work with kids that are super super young because very often our kids are trying to meet the same needs over and over and over again. And we often are, too.

So um for each kid, they're going to have sort of their own profile. And in In my book, Parenting Beyond Power, I talk about the needs cupcake, right? And so that's the idea that you you have this sort of cherry on top of the cupcake. That's the three-ish needs that your kid is trying to meet over and over again. Connection is almost always there. Autonomy is pretty often there. Sometimes sensory issues, movement, other other sorts of things make up that cherry. And then underneath that is the next three to five most common needs and underneath that is everything else. So when you're trying to figure out, you know, why is my child resisting me? What What What are they fighting about? You don't have to go through that entire list of 50 needs. You're looking at is it autonomy? Is it connection?

Is it their other cherry need that I know comes up all the time? If it's not those, look at the frosting. If it's not those, look underneath. And I think that can make it a lot more approachable because that long list even even though I deliberately make my list shorter so it's more more approachable. It It can be intimidating to think well, how am I supposed to know, right? But when you see that your kid is trying to meet the same needs over and over again, then you can just hone in on those first.

Makes sense. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So anything else you want to ask or say to get clarity on where to move forward with this? >> Um No, no, I think I think the most recent approach that we started to talk about was um let's take a minute to calm down. Like so both of you go to find a calm down spot. You can do whatever like read a book, whatever you need to do right now and then we're going to come back and talk about that. And I feel like we did

that one time last week and it it did seem to help, but maybe having the language of the needs and feelings mixed in with that will help us get further. Yeah, after everyone's regulated a little bit, right? It's going to be super hard to do that in the moment. And I might actually advise not doing it in a conflict moment the first time.

Learning a new skill when you're kind of dysregulated can be really really hard. So if you approach it instead from some sort of minor issue that you're having between them and sorry, between you and your child. And I very often advise for the first time, it's okay if you sort of manufacture a little bit of a disagreement between you. And what often works, your kids are on the older side, but maybe they really like ice cream.

What works for younger kids is, you know, Mom, can I have ice cream? And you've already decided to say yes to this. And so you sort of manufacture a little bit concern, right? I'm feeling worried that you might not eat your dinner cuz I have a need to make sure that you're healthy and and growing and I'm guessing that you have a need for probably, you know, joy and fun and indulgence and delicious food. How can we meet both of our needs here?

And then you're you're thinking about strategies. Well, I could have a teaspoon now and the rest after dinner or I could eat it with dinner or, you know, any strategy they suggest you're probably going to agree to cuz you've already decided they can have the ice cream. >> [laughter] >> Right? This isn't This isn't something that you're really you know, you're not going to die on this hill kind of issue. And and then you can kind of really shine this light on hey, we found a way to meet both of our needs. Isn't that cool? And then the next time an issue comes up, it's hey, remember that ice cream thing? Remember how we found a way to meet both of our needs? Do you want to try that again? And so you're sort of doing this skill building between you and the child and then introducing it between the two kids. You may find that that's a little more approachable than trying to teach two kids a new skill when they're both dysregulated.

Sure. Makes sense. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. You're welcome. Anything else you want to ask or say to feel complete? Um nope, I don't think so. All right. Super. Thanks for coming. Stay safe. It's good to meet you. >> Yeah, thanks for having me. So I hope you heard something in that call that you can use, whether you're dealing with sibling fighting or conflicts between your child and other kids. The big takeaway is that fighting is often a bid for connection, either with you or with each other. And when we can see it that way instead of as defiance or meanness, we can help kids get what they actually need in a way that works for everyone. If you want free support with your own question, join me for the next Beyond the Behavior Call. But if you'd prefer to spend an hour 80 minutes focused only on your challenge with your child or communication with your partner in complete privacy. Right now, I'm doing a flash sale on one-on-one coaching. Pay for a package of three sessions with either me or associate coach Denise before end of day, Sunday, April 5th and enter coupon code breakthrough at checkout and get 10% off your payment. You can schedule your first call before the end of May, but the payment has to happen before Sunday, April 5th to get that discount.

Pick a time that works for you at yourparentingmojo.com/parentcoaching. That's yourparentingmojo.com/parentcoaching. And I will say that most parents I work with, I see them for about

three sessions. So, you can make dramatic progress on the issue that you're facing right now, whether it's with your child or with your partner or maybe both, in just three sessions. I'll see you there.