



Discipline: When Children Argue and Fight

*Valya Telep, Former Extension Specialist, Child Development, Virginia State University
Reviewed by Novella Ruffin, Extension Specialist, Virginia State University*

Most brothers and sisters argue and fight and most parents feel it is their duty to find out who is guilty of starting the conflict and then punishing him or her.

Sibling rivalry is usually the cause of arguments and fights between brothers and sisters. They know the parent will come running. It is a way to get attention from the parent.

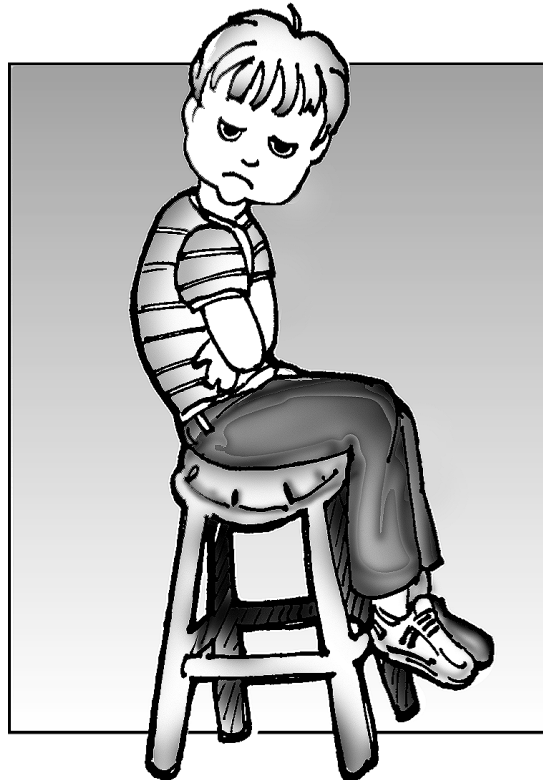
Wise parents refuse to be drawn into their children's fights and arguments unless a very young child is in danger of physical harm. They allow children to assume responsibility for settling their own quarrels.

When mother hears a disagreement, she should check to see that the child is not likely to be hurt and then calmly go about her business. However, it is usually difficult to keep from being drawn into the quarrel as a judge if the children can see you.

You may need to go into your room and shut the door, or go into the bathroom and turn the water on so that the children know you can't hear them.

If mother fails to come running when a disagreement occurs, one of the children will probably come running to her. "Mommy, Susan won't let me play with the ball!" Or "Jerry hit me and I didn't do anything to him!" The child is trying to get his mother to take sides and to scold or punish the other child. Mother can say calmly, "I'm sorry

you are having trouble, but I'm sure you can work it out yourselves."



Children need to learn not to fight and argue, but settling their conflicts for them is not the way to teach them. It may stop the fighting for the moment, but it doesn't stop the next fight or teach children a better way to settle arguments. This kind of teaching is better done during peaceful moments in a friendly way. Ways to settle arguments can be discussed. For example, the children can be encouraged to express their feelings in words rather than actions when they have disagreements. Terry can be encouraged to tell Bill, "I don't like it when you grab the ball away from me."

One reason parents should not get involved in their children's fights is that they can never be sure they are settling the fight fairly. Even

if they see Tommy hit Bill first, they may not realize that Tommy is getting back at Bill because he pinched him yesterday when his parents weren't looking.

When parents take over and try to settle children's arguments, they prevent them from learning to settle their own arguments. Let your children settle their arguments for a month and you will be surprised to find that they are having fewer arguments and are getting along together much

better. You will notice a friendlier, happier atmosphere in your home, and you will have rid yourself of a disagreeable job.

Take a Time-out

A “time-out” is an excellent discipline method to use when your kids are “bugging” you. It works like this. Sandra and Sarah are fighting over a game. Mother says, “Since you can’t play together without fighting, I think you need a time-out. Sarah, you go to your room and Sandra, you go to the bathroom and stay for five minutes. I will let you know when five minutes are up.” (They can be sent to any room where they can be alone.)



A time-out is not a punishment. It is just a boring five minutes when nothing happens.

Time-outs Have Many Advantages

They can be used with children aged three to twelve. (They probably won’t work with children younger than three and they are not appropriate for teenagers.) Time-outs can be used with one child or two children or three--as many children as you have places where they can be alone.

A time-out can be used when children are fighting and quarreling, and when their behavior is annoying you.

Before trying this new method, sit down and explain it to your children when both you and the children are in a happy frame of mind. It always helps if children know what to expect. For example,

Call Time-out in a Calm, Cool Way

It will not work if you make it a punishment or if you scream, “Roger, I’ve told you and Eddie a hundred times not to fight over your toys. You two will just have to take a time-out and see how you like that.”

The purpose of the time-out is to stop undesirable behavior. Roger and Eddie cannot fight when they are in separate rooms. The time-out gives them time to simmer down. It gives them time to think about their behavior and to realize that mother and father will not allow it to continue.

The time-out is particularly helpful for fighting and quarreling between brothers and sisters. Sometimes children fight to get attention. When the parent screams and punishes, he is giving his attention and thus giving children reason to repeat their fighting.

The time-out saves parents from trying to decide who started the fight and who is to blame. Placing blame on one child only makes him more jealous of the child who wasn’t blamed. When fighting breaks out, say, “Since you children cannot get along with each other, I think you need a time-out.” If Bryan says, “But she started it,” say, “I don’t care who started it. You both need a time-out.”

When five minutes are up, say “Five minutes are up.” Don’t say, “You can come out of your room now,” or “You can come out and play now,” or give any kind of directions. Just let them know that five minutes are up.

tell the children, “The next time you argue over your toys, we are going to try something new. It's called a time-out. When I say, ‘Take a time-out,’ it means you have to go to separate rooms and stay for five minutes. I will tell you when five minutes are up.” Calling a time-out instead of punishing makes for less tension between parent and child. It causes less wear and tear on the parent. If the time-out does not work, you probably are not using it correctly. Parents who have difficulty using this method are ones who have trouble saying “No” to their children. If the child refuses to go to his room, simply take him by the hand, lead him to his room, and close the door. The child needs to learn that the parent means what he says, that once a time-out is called he is going to his room and stay there for five minutes. If the child won't stay in his room, the parent is probably not calling the time-out in a firm manner.

The parent must mean what he says. If he calls a time-out and then does not see that the child goes to his room, the technique will not work. The child soon learns that when his parent says, “Take a time-out,” he will not enforce it.

The first time you try a time-out, the children will be surprised that you are not punishing them. After they are familiar with this discipline method, they will accept it and may even call time-out on themselves.

Reverse Time-out

Instead of isolating the child, as in a time-out, the parent is isolated. Reverse time-outs can be used when the child is really “bugging” you. Remove yourself from the situation. You may not be able to change the child's behavior, but you do not have to suffer through it.

If the child is acting silly, arguing, or whining, leave the child and go where he or she can't get to you. For example, take a magazine, go in the bathroom, and lock the door. Don't come out until peace and calm are restored.

Some parents may not like this discipline method. It is inconvenient, and they interpret it as “giving in.” However, children consider your presence rewarding. When you remove your presence, you are withholding a reward. Children soon learn that if they behave a certain way, mother or father will leave the room.

Developed by: Betsy R. Schenck, Retired Extension Specialist, Child Development, Virginia State University

