

Can sibling conflict cause mental health problems later in life?

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One parenting expert says sibling rivalry can cause mental health issues in adulthood such as anxiety and depression. Source: Supplied

EARLY sibling aggression, when not dealt with, can lead to lifelong issues, including learning, social and mental health problems.

University of Queensland researcher John Pickering said sibling aggression is one of the earliest and most common forms of bullying.

"International studies have shown that when aggression between siblings is allowed to occur without correction it can lead to mental health issues in adulthood such as anxiety and depression," Mr Pickering said.

Mr Pickering is currently running a world-first free trial of the [Triple P — Positive Parenting Program](#), to help parents manage sibling conflict. The trial is running for six months and consists of a two-hour workshop to help parents tackle these issues.

"Sibling relationships are very powerful and are typically the longest relationships you'll have with anyone in your whole life," Mr Pickering explains.

"They are a training ground for good and bad — on the positive side, you learn to take turns, reason and share ... but on the negative side, you can learn to overpower, manipulate and use aggression to get what you want."

"For too long we have only looked at the effect parents behaviour has on children," said Renee Mill, a Sydney-based clinical psychologist and parenting author. "A violent, aggressive or abusive sibling can lead to depression, lowered self-esteem, anxiety and failure [in the victim]."

Prevention is better than cure

There's a fine line between healthy sibling rivalry and damaging behaviour.

made a mistake and take responsibility, says family therapist and parenting expert Karen Phillip.

"Never blame another person for your behaviour — we all need to own our behaviour and responses," she said.

Also, ensure that you are not actually causing the aggression from happening by showing favouritism towards one particular child.

"It is parents who are often the culprit and antagonist although they usually have no idea they are doing it," Ms Phillip said. "Comparing the children, praising one over the other, or any imbalance in the parent/child relationship escalates the rivalry."

When should parents step in?

Parents are unsure about how they should deal with sibling rivalry.

Mr Pickering said three out of four Australian parents were concerned about fighting among their children but were unsure what to do about it — or when to intervene.

"It's acceptable and normal for children, particularly young brothers, to have rough and tumble. "It's part of growing up and as parents you don't need to get overinvolved. But it is important to intervene when a scenario becomes unsafe," he said.

The main way parents try to deal with sibling aggression is to get in the middle, punish or send both parties to their room, or try to adjudicate," said Ms Mill.

"It is best for parents to teach emotion regulation plus strategies for learning to live together — but only when things are calm," she added.

If your children are behaving badly, Ms Phillip suggests calmly removing them from the area, placing them in their room or somewhere else alone, explaining your disappointment and explaining there are better ways to behave when they feel angry or frustrated.

"It is great to tell a child what not to do however it is better to help them learn what they should be doing instead," she added.

Mr Pickering said that some other key points to keep in mind include not assigning blame to one particular child, being consistent with rules for all siblings and praising good behaviour.

"Praise them for playing nicely," Mr Pickering said.

"As parents we might say 'they're playing so well together, let's not interrupt', but it is important to comment on good behaviour, otherwise they will realise the only time they get attention is when they behave badly."

Power play

Emotional manipulation can be just as damaging as physical aggression.

While physical aggression is the main focus of the Triple P parenting program, there are other behaviours that can be just as damaging as kicking or hitting, Ms Phillip said.

"While boys often fight physically, girls can at times be far more damaging with their passive-aggressive behaviour."

Celia Murphy is mum to Jane, 12 and Cillian, age 9, and says that her daughter will often manipulate her younger brother to get what she wants.

"We've definitely had our share of power struggles and bullying," Mrs Murphy said. "It's very hard to know when to intervene — do I go in and fix it or teach him to fight his own battles?"

Mrs Murphy added that while her children get on well most of the time she sometimes notices her son becoming sad or withdrawn so she'll probe him to see what's wrong, and if his sister is part of the problem, she gets called in to explain herself.

"Jane is most definitely hormonal and that makes a difference, while Cillian is much simpler in his thinking and doesn't really know how to fight back," she said.

"Honestly though, I think it's just part of growing up."

A helping hand



Parents need the tools to help guide their children through conflict. *Source: Supplied*

Kate Heffernan is a mum to two young boys aged four and five. As soon as she heard about the Triple P program about sibling conflict she signed up immediately.

"My boys love each other but were sometimes fighting for two to three hours a day. I had a couple of bad mornings in a row when all three of us were in tears," Mrs Heffernan said.

"Attending the workshop gave me a couple of strategies that I could immediately take home and put to good use."

Like many mums, Mrs Heffernan said she is time-poor, and doesn't want to spend the precious time she has with her children breaking up fights.

"Attending a parenting program should be seen by everyone as just a normal thing to do. I want to have strong, robust, long-term relationships with my boys."

Find out more about the Positive Parenting Program [here](#).