

“My Kids Fight Nonstop!” How to Squash ADHD Sibling Rivalry in a Lockdown

Sibling rivalry — particularly in ADHD households — grows more worrisome, frequent, and loud in lock down. What’s more, neurotypical siblings are more likely to stifle their own emotions and needs when household stress is high. Here, learn how to facilitate healthier family bonds in a quarantine.

BY [ADHD EDITORIAL BOARD](#) MEDICALLY REVIEWED BY [DR. RONIT LEVY, PSY.D.](#), [RACHAEL SILVERMAN, PSY.D., ABPP](#) ON APRIL 29, 2020

School yards are quiet. Streets are silent. Downtown is hushed. Your house? It’s a cacophony of bickering, shouting, and thumping.

On the bright side, your kids are spending more quality time together than ever before. At the same time, they are dragging ‘[sibling rivalry](#)’ closer and closer to “WWE Monday Night Raw” with each passing day. It’s loud, it’s stressful, and it’s complicated by the fact that one or more of your children has ADHD.

In all families, siblings tend to bring equal parts joy and contention. When a sibling has ADHD, those extremes may become, well, more extreme. Add to this family dynamic the stress of living through a pandemic, while also sheltering in close quarters with the same people for a prolonged period and scant physical stimulation, and you’ve got a recipe for sibling rivalry on steroids.

[Children with ADHD](#) are not the only ones struggling. Neurotypical siblings are grappling with their own difficult emotions; they just may be less noticeable. For them, feelings of resentment and frustration related to their sibling’s ADHD symptoms are heightened now, too.

The result? More conflict. More arguments. More time-outs. More resentment.

“My two children have no break from each other and are getting on each other’s nerves,” wrote one ADDitude reader in a recent survey. *“They call each other hurtful names and fight constantly. Some days feel like WWII. My younger child is neurotypical and I’m worried about the long-term impact on his relationship with his brother, who has ADHD.”*

[Neurotypical siblings](#) may feel extra pressure to behave well and follow the rules to minimize family stress. They may feel jealous and resentful of the extra time, attention, and family resources needed for the sibling with ADHD. Anger may bubble up when they perceive unfair and inequitable treatment, until it can no longer be tolerated. Some siblings retreat from the family to avoid conflict, keeping their feelings hidden or stifled. Still, the emotions are there, quietly eroding the sibling bond.

For insight and advice regarding ADHD sibling challenges, ADDitude reached out to [Ronit Levy, Psy.D.](#), and [Rachael Silverman, Psy.D., ABPP](#). Both are clinical psychologists who work with families living with ADHD and have decades of

experience. Here's their advice for promoting brotherly — or sisterly — love sheltering in place, and how to handle fights that get physical.

Sibling Strategy #1: Provide Stability and Predictability at Home

To instill [emotional stability](#), parents must communicate a sense of safety to their children — ADHD or not. “The lack of their usual schedule and activities means more stress and less stimulation for kids, especially those with ADHD,” Levy says. “ADHD rarely travels alone. So, any co-existing [anxiety](#) and mood disorder are worse now, too.”

[\[Read This: Parenting the Child Whose Sibling Has ADHD\]](#)

Controlling what you can — the [routines and rules](#) within your own four walls — can help your kids feel less anxious. “It’s important for you to let them know you’ve got this. Kids look to their parents for signs they are safe. Without these signs, kids get anxious and try to control things themselves,” Levy says. “Eating, sleeping, working, and playing at the same time each day brings a sense of normalcy and grounds all of us, so it’s vital to put some structure in place.”

Sibling Strategy #2: Establish Acceptable Rules of Behavior

Sibling squabbles are inevitable — especially in quarantine when playmate options and activities are limited. Without clear boundaries and rules for behavior, children may feel they have to referee themselves, which is scary and overwhelming. “Focus on a few basic rules,” Levy says. “You can explain, for example, that in our family we don’t hit, we don’t swear, we don’t insult each other, and we don’t damage each other’s things.”

“Kids should know that disagreements are okay,” she says. “It’s even okay to dislike each other from time to time, but siblings must understand that they are always on the same team and that means caring for each other.”

Sibling Strategy #3: Encourage “I” Statements

The squeaky wheel — the child who is louder and more demanding — gets the oil. This is understandable, but it sends the wrong message.

“Giving in to the child who is more disruptive tells the child, ‘Hey, if I’m louder and more destructive, I get what I want,’” Silverman explains. Kids need to learn self-soothing skills; it’s a good idea to practice these before things get out of hand.

“I” statements are an effective way to express your needs without making the other person feel defensive, Silverman says. “Use ‘I’ statements to get across your point without making the other person shut down and stop listening. Kids can do this even when their adrenaline is pumping.”

Let’s say an argument erupts after one child grabs the other’s Xbox controller. An effective “I” statement script might be: *“I feel angry when Sam takes my Xbox*

controller away from me. It's mine and I need to know ahead of time when he wants to use it."

A parent's response should follow in kind. *"I understand you were angry with Sam for taking your controller but hitting is never acceptable. You have every right to be angry, but let's go over acceptable ways to show those feelings to your brother."*

This works, according to Silverman, because it validates their feelings and teaches them to problem solve.

Sibling Strategy #4: Continue Treatment in Lock Down

[Exercise](#), quiet time alone, and calming music can help regulate emotions, but some children with ADHD also need medication and/or professional support.

"If you sense your child with ADHD is acting less rationally than usual, they're likely dysregulated," Levy says. "Dysregulated children become anxious, moody, and upset more quickly because it's harder to get their feelings, thoughts, and bodies moving in the same direction."

Do not cut back on [ADHD medication](#) and therapy if you can help it. "I know some parents are giving medication less frequently to save money and cutting out therapy for the same reason," Levy says. If you've lost your job or have been furloughed, discuss the problem with your family doctor, therapist, or ADHD coach.

"Most professionals want to help and are open to accommodations right now," Levy says. "See if they'll accept a reduced fee or will make themselves available for less frequent [remote therapy sessions](#). Instead of cutting out therapy altogether, suggest meeting once a week instead of twice or meet for two 30-minute sessions instead of two hour-long sessions. Doctors may also be able to provide families with medication samples so refills can be smaller or pushed back a bit. Removing layers of treatment and support during a crisis will only make a bad situation worse for everyone."

Sibling Strategy #5: Check in Privately with the Neurotypical Sibling Each Day

Giving time and attention to the neurotypical child benefits the sibling with ADHD, too. "They put up with a lot and it's important to let them know their feelings and needs are important, too," Levy says. "Constantly asking them to be understanding of their sibling's condition can create resentment toward the brother or sister with ADHD. It can also make them feel like they can't ask for help."

For example, it's common for neurotypical siblings to begin each day by gauging the ADHD sibling's demeanor and adjusting themselves accordingly. "They get a read of the ADHD sibling's mood as a way of determining in advance what the tone of the family will be for the day," Levy says. "Giving them regular one-on-one time tells them that feelings matter."

Sibling Strategy #6. Investigate Silence

Silence isn't always golden in an ADHD household. "Neurotypical siblings may not be willing to stir the pot," Silverman says. "Some are painfully aware of how behavior related to ADHD symptoms can challenge parents, and they do not want to further burden them, so they keep their feelings to themselves."

But Levy cautions parents not to put the neurotypical child on a pedestal. "Children with ADHD are extremely sensitive, so you want to be mindful of things you say that make them feel worse about their struggles," Levy says. "Unfair comparisons can plant seeds of [self-hatred](#). Privately acknowledging the sacrifices and accomplishments of the neurotypical child is a better way to go."

Sibling Strategy #7: Hold Regular Family Meetings

Family meetings promote health and harmony, according to Silverman. The purpose is to give every family member an opportunity to share what they need and how they feel — not to dole out punishment.

"Kids learn important social skills in family meetings where everyone's voice and opinion matters," she says. "In sibling relationships, the neurotypical sibling is often bulldozed and doesn't get validated or listened to enough. The family meeting allows them to use their voice. The ADHD child also benefits by learning to tolerate distress and how to curb their impulse to disrupt, intrude, and be verbally intrusive."

Silverman recommends using a stuffed animal during the meeting. "The stuffed animal has two purposes: holding it means you have the floor, and it keeps you safe," she says. "Sometimes emotions become heated. If the stuffed animal is thrown, it won't hurt anyone."

Take turns passing the stuffed animal to each family member and then practice what Silverman calls "active listening." "When Sam's turn is over, have Tommy repeat back what Sam said," she says. "This teaches family members how to pay attention and listen carefully. Plus, it validates the person who is sharing their feelings. It also teaches the child with ADHD to delay their impulse to interrupt and delay gratification by having to wait their turn to speak."

Don't permit interruptions while a family member is speaking. "By waiting for their turn, children with ADHD learn to tolerate distress," Silverman says. "This spills over into friendships later on."

Sibling Strategy #8: Seek Support for Yourself

Parenting a child with ADHD is a 24/7 job, especially now, and so it's important to connect with other parents who "get" what the ADHD experience really feels like. Your pediatrician, therapist, or school guidance counselor may also be able to recommend support groups or put you in touch with an ADHD coach. Philadelphia-based Levy says there are support groups for parents in person and on-line and likely more being added to assist during this crisis. "To find them Google 'support for parents of kids with ADHD' to find them and look for parents who have children in similar phases or ages," Levy says.

What to Do When Fights Turn Physical

Hitting, kicking, and screaming are scary and upsetting — for kids and parents alike. Acts of aggression signal behavior that's out of control. When children can't effectively communicate their feelings, they may communicate them in a physical, counter-productive way.

“Due to executive functioning challenges, children with ADHD may exhibit more [explosive anger](#),” Silverman says. “They often have trouble controlling their impulses and may make poor decisions, but it's important to realize they aren't necessarily being malicious; they just aren't interpreting social cues accurately or thinking through their behavior.”

ADHD should never be an excuse for aggressive behavior. Parents should teach all children how to work through and manage their feelings in similar ways. But, in the heat of the moment, it's best to separate sparring siblings immediately.

“Never get in the middle of the war zone with two fighting children,” Silverman says. “Remind them that hitting, kicking, or other types of physical aggression are not acceptable in your family and separate them for 20 minutes. This isn't a punishment; it's a cool-down period.” During the cool-down period, have your child engage in self-soothing strategies that have been practiced ahead of time so when they are ready to talk about the situation, they are in a different state of mind and completely cooled off.

“Parents may want a quick resolution and be tempted to end it without allowing the kids to work through it. Don't,” Levy says. “Doing this only works for a few minutes and ultimately makes the problem worse.”

This is an important opportunity for siblings to take responsibility for their actions and to develop problem-solving skills. “Don't lecture,” Silverman says. “Instead, give them the respect of listening and allowing them to be heard, validate their feelings, and encourage them to offer solutions, too.” Try your best to be available to discuss their feeling about the situation when your child says he's ready to talk. Being available at that time, validates their feelings and helps them feel safe to take the full 20 minutes to cool down.

When emotions are high, logic flies out the window. “Fighting children can't tell you rationally what happened and they won't be able to take ownership for what they did until they calm down,” Silverman says, so talk to each side alone to hear their side and validate their feelings separately.