

The Kids Are Fighting!

We recently experienced some rapid changing weather. On Friday, we had over 6 inches of snow. On Saturday, it got up to about 70 degrees and that afternoon most of the ground was dry. It was strange and wonderful to observe. Parenting can have momentum swings that are very similar, but more confusing and can leave us feeling ill prepared, or even failing. One of the most difficult things to parent is when your children get in physical altercations.

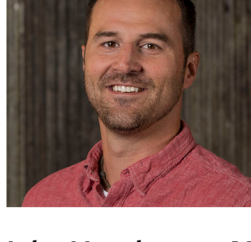
As adults, we know that violence is a poor way of handling crisis. It most often results in more crisis and rarely solves anything. (Yes, I qualified rarely- see WWII as an example, and it is not unheard of for boys to become best friends after exchanging blows). For children, they have not yet learned the complex skills and character traits of patience, self-control, gentleness, delayed gratification, and altruism that help steer us to a path of conflict resolution, or mutual understanding.

My youngest son is three and is delayed in his speech motor skills, when trying to explain himself, he can become frustrated. His go to is to scream and hit his brothers. He is not a sociopath; he simply lacks the higher skills to navigate his disappointment, frustration, and inability to empathize where others are coming from. His world is entirely seen through his eyes, he lacks the ability to empathize or see the “bigger picture.” My oldest is nine. Even he can lack the awareness of how his actions or words affect others. Rather than violence his selfish worldview most often shows itself in overt verbal manipulation. He can tend to force his will in given situations. In their minds, it works-immediately. They do not have the capacity or practice to see how their short-term aggressive solutions will negatively affect these same relationships in the future. The natural consequences of losing friends, developing a reputation, and creating a lonely future.

While consistency in consequences is paramount in training our children. The art of parenting requires us to use the very traits we desire to instill in our children. It is easy to fall prey to the trap of shock at their behavior and simply punish them. It is common to meet their level of emotion and react. But it is better to calm down, and have the children calm down (usually through a timeout that includes deep breathing exercises) and then seek to understand where the child is coming from. The deep breathing timeout is for both the parent and the child! When we help the child to recognize their feelings, we can affirm that they are not “bad” and keep from shaming them-which brings a whole host of other problems. We can validate that they were a part of a frustrating situation-whether they were not understood, they were encountering an “unfair” situation in game play, or perhaps were unable to come to a mutual decision on rules or even agreeing on playing the same game-this conversation is NOT about the behavior.

We need to model the traits of empathy, self-control, gentleness, kindness, active listening, and delayed gratification by hearing our child out. Try saying things like, “It sounds like your sibling(s)/friends were not letting you make any rules or decisions, that isn’t fair” or “There is only the one toy that you both want, it is difficult to be patient and share.” This helps the child know that you do understand what his/her frustration is and that they are not out of line for being disappointed. The truth is, its ok to be disappointed, but it is not comfortable to experience disappointment. Not only is it important to learn conflict management, it is important to develop resilience to hardship. Next, give a few solutions they can try if and when a similar situation happens in the future. The child(ren) must still have the consequence for the violent behavior, actions have consequences, but the parent can issue the punishment and be a comfort to the frustration. They are separate issues. Your child should feel the freedom to come to you when they are hurt, discouraged, upset.

This is such a difficult process as it is ongoing through childhood! I am right there with you! Both in parenting my children, and managing my own anger and disappointment. Give yourself the same grace you receive from our Heavenly Father! He does not beat you up for every time you fall short, in fact, He is there with us, having experienced every temptation and trial as us, but without sin. In short, if your kids are fighting, especially during this unprecedented time of worldwide quarantine, you are not a failure! It is going to take time to teach conflict management. It is going to interrupt our plans, routines and schedules. But it is vital that you do not give up, and do not feel like you are the only one going through this! We need community. If you are really struggling, give a friend, your Lifegroup leader, your pastor, a call. Get out of your own head and hear the wisdom and grace that parenting is difficult, you did not lose the manual- you have a unique child in a unique time in history, with unique parenting circumstances- but God trusted that child to you and is with you always. He promised.



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