

LEAVE  
**MY** *Stuff*  
ALONE!



*Dear Barry*

MY two boys are driving me crazy with their incessant fighting and jealousy.

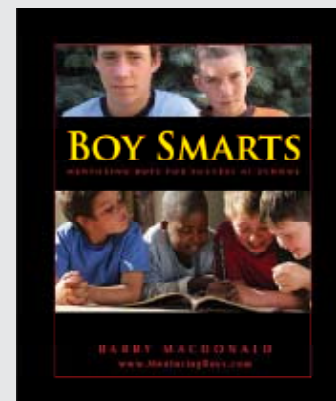
I recall the warmth and hope I felt for our family the day we brought little Jacob home to meet his brother Daniel, who was almost two, anticipating their growing friendship.

I honestly thought that having them close in age would benefit them, thinking that they'd get to experience so many wonderful things together. Boy, was I in for a surprise. It seems like they have been at odds from the get-go. I worry about the strain their rivalry is having on our family, especially during those few precious hours at the end of the day when we have the opportunity to be together.

**OCCASIONALLY**, they can be the best of friends, but that is rare.

*Part One...*

**SIBLING  
RIVALRY  
BEYOND  
CAIN & ABEL**



## Playing referee is exhausting...

**THEY** are eight and ten years old now and they still quarrel about everything—toys, sports, bedtimes, chores, privacy, bossiness, television shows, neighbourhood friendships, personal appearances, and school grades.

I am particularly flabbergasted when they clash over computer time. Unlike his quieter brother Daniel, Jacob much prefers rambunctious outdoor play to electronic games, but they still have battles over computer time.

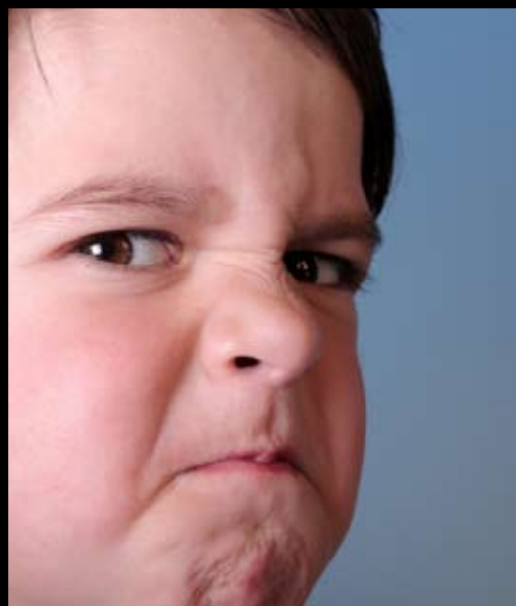
I am exhausted from trying to play referee.

**MY** husband says it is normal for brothers to fight, that fighting could even be good for them. Of course, that's easy for him to say when he works longer hours, so it's mainly up to me to get the evening meal on the table after my own day at work. Interestingly, the moment he walks through the door at dinnertime, the boys' arguments intensify.

**IT'S** possible that my husband is right when he says that growing up with no brothers and one sister five years older than I was, I was not prepared for boys' conflicts. Still, I worry I am not doing enough, and that these daily fights will grow into lifelong hostility.

**WHY** do they argue when I most need their cooperation? How can I help them get along better?

*Clara*  
*Tired mother*  
*Toronto*



My boys quarrel about everything — toys, sports, bedtimes, chores, privacy, bossiness, television shows, neighbourhood friendships, personal appearances, and school grades.

## Could it be that sibling conflict is more complex than we thought?

*Dear Clara,*

**MOST** parents who have two or more children have become attuned to that moment when, from the other room, playful or excited laughter turns into whining, or angry shouts, or screams or crashes.

**NOBODY** can push emotional buttons like a sibling.

**HISTORICALLY**, parent experts have claimed that sibling rivalry is inevitable and that we ought to leave children to work it out.

**NOW** many parents, educators, and researchers are questioning whether leaving kids to sort out their own conflicts is sufficient.

**EVEN** though your boys' fights are driving you around the bend, it is true that a certain amount of conflict is inevitable. After all, we can't change our siblings the way we can change our friends, so it is likely that the conflicts with our siblings will be more intense than with friends at times. In addition, conflict can teach children about respecting the needs of others as well as asserting their own needs.

**HOWEVER**, I suspect that just as we have become uncomfortably aware of how we once turned a blind eye to playground bullying, we will soon recognize that ignoring the fights of siblings is not adequate.

**COULD** it be that sibling conflict is more complex than we thought?

**NEW** research offered in a recent book entitled *Nurture Shock* shines a light on sibling conflict, offering fresh perspectives for your consideration:

- ♦ on average, young siblings argue or fight 3 to 4 times an hour, and that the length of the conflicts varies, but the average is about 10 minutes per hour or about 15% of the time

- ♦ about one out of every eight conflicts ends in compromise or reconciliation—the other seven times, the siblings merely withdraw, usually after the older child has bullied or intimidated the younger



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## Assertive 3 year-olds and bossy 5 year-olds can be a nasty mix...

- ♦ kids make seven times as many negative and controlling statements to their siblings as they do to their friends.
- ♦ kids are more likely to fight about sharing physical possessions or claiming them as their own than competition for parental attention.

**BEFORE** considering how you might reduce their rivalry without robbing your boys of the healthy opportunity to work it out between themselves, I suggest that you consider possible reasons for your boys' competition and conflicts. Time and time again I have witnessed parents and teachers make assumptions about children's behaviour and jump too quickly to expedient remedies.

**OFTEN**, however, there can be reasons for children's behaviour that are not obvious, and which, if understood, would call for a different response.

### Developing and Changing Needs

**IT'S** typical for kids' shifting developmental needs to affect how they relate to one another. Assertive 3 year-olds and bossy 5 year-olds can be a nasty mix. When Jacob was 3 and learning to assert his will, he may have been very protective of his toys and belongings and likely reacted aggressively to Daniel's domineering interest in his possessions. In turn, Daniel may have been trying out his own developing sense of autonomy as he entered Kindergarten, practicing bossiness over his younger brother. Now that they are older and Daniel will soon be experimenting with increased independence as a teenager, he might resent being asked to take care of Jacob and play with him.

**WHEN** someone new moves into a seat you thought was yours, jealousy is an all too human response. While it is likely that parents such as you and your husband were able to take the time to help the older child adjust to the arrival of a new infant, this jealousy dynamic can also occur with blended families I have worked with. I'll not forget the reactive anger of one ten year-old boy when he lost his place as the eldest of three brothers, and suddenly became the middle child of five children, with the two step-siblings above him only a bit older than he was. Even with the most amicable divorce in the world, a child like this is losing, at least temporarily, his sense of place and identity.

**WE** all want a place of security, and will challenge whatever appears to threaten our place in the world.



Even with the most amicable divorce in the world, a child like this is losing, at least temporarily, his sense of place and identity.

We know that the brain needs lots of water to function at its optimum...

## Everyday Practical Concerns

**DAILY** stressors can drive children to take out their irritations and anger on a sibling. Lack of food or sleep can trigger a grouchy disposition. Over the past twenty years children have been sleeping less and less, with a third of children now suffering from inadequate sleep. Evidence suggests that kids who sleep more get better grades. It is easy to hypothesize that sleep deprivation can also manifest as behavioural symptoms rather than obvious tiredness. In addition, a child who feels vulnerable over something parents might see as relatively small—changing a bedroom, starting on a sports team—might act out more with a sibling who is an available witness, dueling partner—or scapegoat.

**JUST** as every teacher knows that the day after Halloween or the week before Christmas must be carefully planned, parents might consider how daily frustrations and unmet needs can swell their children's animosity toward one another.

## Dietary Concerns

**IS** it possible that one or both of your boys' argumentative posturing before dinner could be related to nutritional deficiencies, dehydration, or even food allergies? Perhaps the boys need slower-burning protein foods at lunch and after school rather than the fast-burning carbohydrates and sugars so common to school lunches and after school snacks. Are the boys drinking enough water rather than processed fizzy drinks? We know from brain science that the brain needs lots of water to function at its optimum. If you suspect a dietary concern, seek the advice of a family doctor or a naturopathic physician to consider whether your boys' battles are fueled by sensitivities to wheat, dairy, sugar, artificial colors and additives, or something else.

**CONSIDER** trying the following experiment if you are a person who rarely drinks coffee or limits yourself to only one cup per day: Have several cups before your next monthly strata council committee meeting. I suspect that you will have a firsthand experience of how diet can make it difficult for us to manage conflict.

## Individual Temperaments

**TEMPERAMENT** can explain why a boy who is not afraid of playing street hockey can suddenly become terrified to visit Chuck E Cheese.



Daily frustrations and unmet needs can swell their children's animosity toward one another.

## Kids will pick up on your stress, and will likely emulate your ways of managing...

**YOUR** boys' individual personalities and ability to adapt to others will affect how they get along. Daniel's quieter, more introspective temperament may be rattled by Jacob's rambunctious and outgoing nature. Alternatively, if Daniel is more sensitive than Jacob and seeks you out for comfort more frequently, Jacob might see his brother as a rival who is taking attention that should be going his way. Similarly, if Jacob has some sort of learning issue requiring more parental time, Daniel might pick up on this disparity and act out to get attention. Sometimes one child's perfectionist tendencies clash with the other child's relaxed temperament, or one child's impetuosity goes against the grain of a more cautious sibling.

### Parental Role-modeling

**CONSIDER** how you and your husband manage individual stress as well as disagreements you may have as a couple. Children will pick up on your stress, and will likely emulate your ways of managing, sidestepping, or escalating conflict.

**DO** your kids hear you talking about anger at a co-worker, worrying out loud about a relative's illness, or arguing with a spouse about financial matters? Kids are often sponges for their parents' anxieties and frustrations. You might assume that you are cleverly hiding your own frustrations as a couple, but it is during times of heightened stress that kids' antennae tune in. When parents work through conflict in ways that are respectful rather than blaming, calmly assertive rather than aggressive, they increase the chances that kids will adopt similar habits when they run into problems with one another. When kids routinely observe us shout and slam doors, or sulk and withdraw when differences arise, they're likely to pick up those habits too.

### Family Atmosphere

**PARENTS** establish a certain tone or atmosphere in the home that can enhance or cloud sibling relationships. When expectations are unclear, absent, or inconsistent, kids may become anxious about what is expected, and then vent their anxieties through squabbles with a sibling. A rigid or overly authoritarian family atmosphere can challenge kids to rebel, specially kids who are Daniel's age or older.



Kids are often sponges for their parents' anxieties and frustrations.

## Overscheduled kids may express their frustrations in their sibling politics...

**IF** you are not familiar with Dorothy Law Nolte's poem, "**Children learn what they live,**" it might be helpful for you and your husband to read the poem together and consider what you may be reinforcing in your home.

### Time and Performance Pressures

**WE** no longer have to wait till adulthood in order to feel over-committed and overwhelmed. In many cases, we seem to be acculturating our children to be burdened by schedules and too much busyness that they are unable to relax after school or play creatively. These kids may begin to seek inappropriate ways to release that stress. Kids who signal they feel overscheduled by complaining about the number of activities they're involved in or refusing to go to them may express their frustrations in their sibling politics.

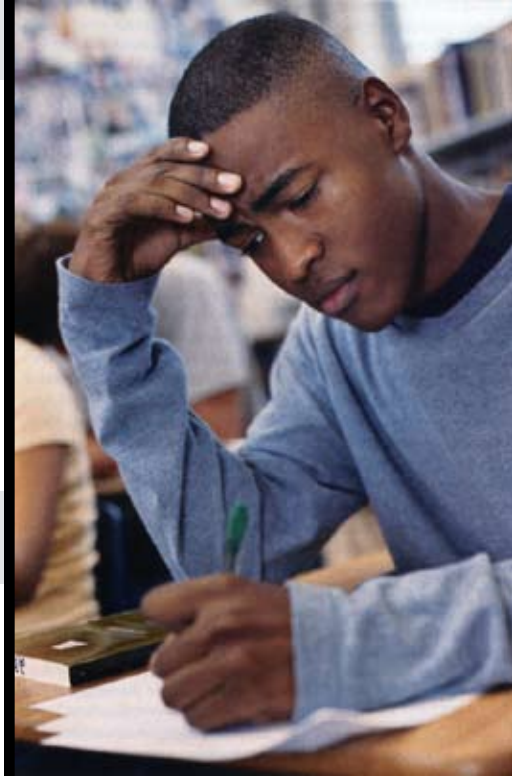
### Stress Outside of the Home

**SCHOOL**, sports teams, and music lessons usually help children learn new skills and make new friends. However, in some cases, stress outside the home, even through activities that are supposedly good for them, can be a source of frustration that leads to crankier sibling interaction. If either of your boys becomes more irritable or more withdrawn than usual, consider whether they may be overwhelmed by pressures associated with a teacher, a coach, or a schoolyard bully.

A recent study in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* found that schoolyard bullies are more likely to bring bullying behaviours home to their siblings. The study found that significantly more boys than girls bully their younger sibling, and that kids with an older male sibling were the most victimized group. Another current study established that 60% more boys are likely to require psychiatric care during their teen years if they were bullies or frequent victims in earlier years, and even greater if they were both a victim and bully. The study also notes that increased childhood bullying is linked to increased depression and suicidal thinking among teenage males.

### Responding to Sibling Rivalry

**WHILE** the length and scope of this article is somewhat limited, it is my



We seem to be acculturating our children to be burdened by schedules and too much busyness that they are unable to relax after school or play creatively.

## Next month's newsletter... ideas to get beyond "Who started it!"

hope that this initial installment will encourage you to consider the ways in which your boys' sibling conflicts may be fueled by circumstances that go beyond the obvious.

**NEXT** month's newsletter will offer alternatives beyond "Who started it?" Part two will outline practical and matter-of-fact ideas to curb sibling rivalry, and will include realistic suggestions for teaching important life skills your boys need to live more harmoniously in your family.

**MEANWHILE**, over the next month I encourage you to reflect on the underlying reasons for their excessive conflict that you might not yet have considered. I also suggest that you reduce the amount of time you spend refereeing their differences and avoid taking sides or playing detective with them. Specifically, you might try saying the following in a calm and assertive manner the next time their tempers go through the roof: "This isn't working," and send them to separate rooms for about 10 minutes. Sometimes it's best just to give them space for a little while rather than immediately trying to rehash the conflict. If you want to help them to learn from their experience, wait until the emotions have calmed; otherwise their conflict is likely to escalate into blaming and and yelling again. Be careful to not to stare or look at either one of your boys in particular, as it is easy to unconsciously look to the child we perceive as the instigator, unintentionally feeding their perception that we are taking sides.

**DO** your best to appreciate each child for who he is, and do not compare or typecast your children. It's not too surprising when Lisa, in **The Simpsons**, is the brain in the family, that Bart will define his identity as a troublemaker. Take time, whatever you can manage, to spend with each child alone, and he will be less likely to feel a strong need to separate himself from his sibling to gain attention from you.

**WHEN** your children do fight, your own calm and relaxed response will be a model for your boys' interactions. And knowing how we all like to be appreciated, take the time to notice the occasions that they do cooperate and behave like the best of friends. This noticing of their brotherly friendship will also go a long way to help you maintain your own positive perspective—and sanity! • • •

*Barry MacDonald*  
MentoringBoys.com



**BOY SMARTS**  
*Action Talk*  
**S a t u r d a y**  
**WORKSHOPS**

Vancouver, January 30—Sold out!

Vancouver, February 27—Sold out!

Toronto , March 6—80% full

Montreal, March 13—Space available

Vancouver, March 27—Just opened

# Children Learn What They Live

If a child lives with criticism, **he learns to condemn.**

If a child lives with hostility, **he learns to fight.**

If a child lives with fear, **he learns to be apprehensive.**

If a child lives with pity, **he learns to feel sorry for himself.**

If a child lives with ridicule, **he learns to be shy.**

If a child lives with jealousy, **he learns what envy is.**

If a child lives with shame, **he learns to feel guilty.**

If a child lives with encouragement, **he learns to be confident.**

If a child lives with tolerance, **he learns to be patient.**

If a child lives with praise, **he learns to be appreciative.**

If a child lives with acceptance, **he learns to love.**

If a child lives with approval, **he learns to like himself.**

If a child lives with recognition, **he learns that it is good to  
have a goal.**

If a child lives with sharing, **he learns about generosity.**

If a child lives with honesty and fairness, **he learns what truth  
and justice are.**

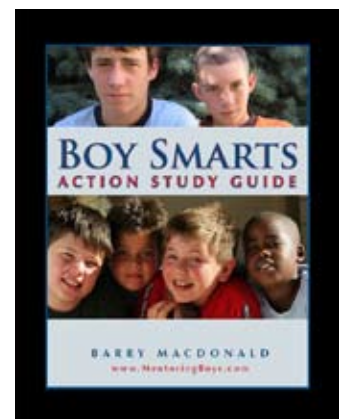
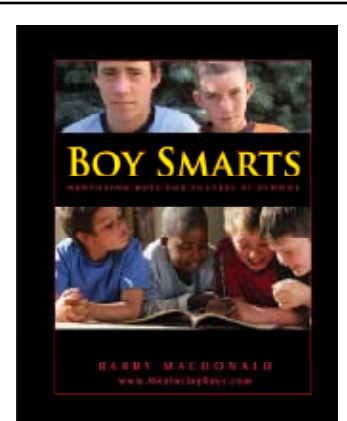
If a child lives with security, **he learns to have faith in himself  
and in those about him.**

If a child lives with friendliness, **he learns that the world is a  
nice place in which to live.**

If you live with serenity, **your child will live with peace of mind.**

**Dorothy Law Nolte**

family counsellor and writer



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