

## ***Parenting Puzzles (May 2006)***

**Q:** I have two children, ages 7 and 10. When they were younger, they usually played together very nicely, but now all they seem to do is bicker and fight. Even the smallest disagreement turns into a huge battle. I know siblings are “supposed” to fight, but this is ridiculous? How can I make it stop?

**A:** “Sibling rivalry” is not uncommon but it is, nevertheless, a source of great frustration to many parents! Here are some tips for managing the squabbles and fostering a more positive relationship:

- Each child should be held responsible for their own behavior. If one child teases the other, who responds by hitting back, both children should be disciplined. Ultimately, the goal of the discipline is to interrupt the conflict and to teach the children other strategies of conflict resolution.
- Encourage compromise. Sharing and compromise are important aspects of all interpersonal relationships. The ability to engage in these behaviors requires each child to consider the perspective and feelings of the other.
- Give siblings permission to spend time apart. Most people, even the best of friends, need some time apart. Kids sometimes have trouble recognizing when they need to separate themselves in order to “regroup.” If they are unable to reach some sort of adequate resolution to their problem, advise them to play separately for a while until they are ready and able to play more collaboratively.
- Pick your battles. Allow children the opportunities to resolve their minor differences and disagreements, through any number of strategies. Always intervene if safety is a concern.
- Encourage compassion. Develop a culture of kindness and sensitivity in the family, where family members recognize and respect the feelings of others.
- Avoid comparisons and favoritism. Every child wants to feel special and loved in their own right. Comparing siblings or demonstrating more favor or affection to one child over another will likely increase sibling rivalry.

The fact that your children are fighting with each other does not mean that they do not care about each other. Look for signs of empathy in their relationship to help you remember that, behind all the bickering and complaining, there is some genuine love, compassion and caring.

**Q:** My 14-year-old daughter has become extremely moody in the past few months. It seems that, no matter what I say or do, she is critical. She also seems to be spending much more time alone in her room these days. I'd like to believe that her behavior is typical of adolescents, but I also worry that she may be depressed. How can I tell the difference between normal teenage moodiness and something more serious?

**A:** As you indicated, some changes in mood and demeanor are typical for most adolescents. A primary aspect of adolescent development is identity development. As part of this process, most teens begin to spend more time with their peers. Many teens will also display behaviors that help them to feel more unique and/or independent. The most obvious behavioral displays are through choices in clothing, music and "attitude." Nevertheless, it is estimated that 4-5% of adolescents in the U.S. are clinically depressed. Signs and symptoms of depression are as follows:

- Depressed and/or irritable mood that is present most of the day, nearly every day (by teen's report and/or by observation of others)
- Markedly decreased interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities
- Significant changes in appetite (increased or decreased) and/or significant weight loss (not due to dieting) or weight gain
- Significant changes in sleep patterns (e.g., difficulty falling asleep, frequent waking through the night and/or increased sleeping during the day)
- Physical movements appear to be slowed down or agitated
- Fatigue and/or loss of energy nearly every day
- Feelings of worthlessness
- Excessive and/or inappropriate feelings of guilt
- Difficulty concentrating and/or increased forgetfulness (may result in diminished school performance and/or drop in grades)
- Recurrent thoughts of death
- Thoughts of suicide (with or without plan and intent)
- Self-abusive and/or self-mutilation behaviors (e.g., cutting)
- Alcohol and/or drug abuse

In addition to looking for these behaviors, ask yourself the following

questions: Has there been a significant change in my child's mood and/or behaviors? Are these changes interfering with his/her functioning at school? Socially? At home? Have the changes in mood and/or behavior been present for an extended period of time (e.g., more than 2 weeks?)

If you have observed several of the symptoms listed above and answered "yes" to any of these questions, it may be wise to seek consultation with a professional who has expertise in working with children and adolescents (e.g., pediatrician, mental health professional). In most cases, the moodiness parents observe falls in the realm of "typical" adolescent behavior. However, if you as a parent are feeling concerned or overwhelmed by your teen's behaviors, do not hesitate to ask for help, for yourself and for your child.