What to say when your six-year-old hits a brother or sister

"My six-year-old punched his older brother in a fight over Lego. They're both yelling and I don't know who started it. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Who started it? Right, both of you, go to your rooms. I don't want to hear it."

When siblings fight, the instinct is to play judge: find out who started it, sentence both, send them away. The research on parents in sibling fights describes a different role, closer to a referee who teaches.

What is known, and at what age

Researchers in Canada observed 40 families with two- and four-year-old siblings. Parents stepped in during the most intense fights. When they did, the children used fewer power strategies and more negotiation.

In a later study, mothers of children aged five to eight were trained to mediate their fights, helping the children talk the problem through rather than ruling on it. Children in those families reasoned and talked about feelings more than children in other families, and younger siblings in particular had more say. The authors note that the long-term effects are not known.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Stop. Hands down. Nobody gets hurt." Then, once they are calm: "You both wanted the Lego. What could each of you do next time?"

Researchers who study sibling aggression say that even age-typical hitting should be stopped at once, and that it is better to focus on the hurt done than on who meant what. The American Academy of Pediatrics says yelling at or shaming children is minimally effective in the short term and not effective in the long term.

What the words do

Take 1 asks the one question no one can answer fairly and then ends the conversation. Take 2 stops the hitting with three plain words and a rule ("Nobody gets hurt"). When everyone is calm, it names what both wanted, so neither is the villain, and asks each child for a next step. You are teaching them how to settle the next fight without you.

If you live in two homes

Children in two homes may bring a fight from one house to the other, or hit at the changeover, when feelings run high. Keep the same limit and the same words in your home. If the hitting happens at both homes, tell the other parent directly, adult to adult, and agree on one rule both homes use.

In the UK

If one child is often hurt, or you are worried about the hitting, your GP or your child's school is a good place to start. If anyone is in danger, call 999. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.