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

"My eleven-year-old shoved her little brother into the wall. She says he started it, he's crying. What do I say right now, and after?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're the oldest, you should know better! Wait till your dad hears about this."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Stop. Nobody gets hurt in this house. Separate rooms for ten minutes, then we'll talk."

At eleven, a shove into a wall is no longer a toddler's swipe, and it is easy to wave off as "sibling stuff." The instinct is either to shrug or to make the older child the villain. The research says to take it seriously and stay fair.

What is known, and at what age

A US national sample of 3,599 children and young people asked about the past year. Children and teens who had been on the receiving end of sibling aggression, physical or not, reported more distress, and sibling aggression was linked with distress on its own, separately from aggression by peers. It is a survey of links at one time, not proof of cause, but it is why researchers say sibling hitting should not be dismissed as harmless.

Researchers at the University of New Hampshire who study sibling aggression say parents should always stop it straight away, focus on the hurt rather than on intent, and use it to teach handling conflict. They count it as more serious when it is one-sided, with the same child consistently harmed, when it keeps happening, or when there are injuries or threats.

In a study of mothers trained to mediate their children's fights, children aged five to eight reasoned and talked about feelings more. Your children may be older; the steps still fit.

What the words do

Take 1 makes her the villain for being older and hands the problem to someone else. Take 2 stops it with a house rule, not a verdict, and gives everyone ten minutes to cool down. Comfort the one who was hurt. Then talk with both, one at a time if needed: what happened, what each felt, what each will do next time. The American Academy of Pediatrics says shaming children is minimally effective; a calm, fair talk is the alternative.

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.