What to say when your kids are fighting over a toy

"My five- and seven-year-old are screaming over the same scooter. I end up yelling "Who started it?" and picking a winner. What do I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Who started it? Right, give it to your sister. And you, go to your room."

"Who started it?" makes you the judge, and a five-year-old and a seven-year-old will each give evidence for the defence. Whoever loses the verdict tends to start the next round.

What the research found

In a study from Canada, mothers of children aged five to eight were trained to mediate their children's disputes instead of deciding them. Mediation meant setting ground rules, letting each child say what happened and how they felt, and asking the children to come up with solutions. With training, mothers could use these steps at home, and both mothers and children preferred them. Children in mediating families reasoned, talked about feelings and talked about each other's intentions more often than children in comparison families, and the younger siblings in particular had more say. The authors were clear that the long-term effects were still unknown.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Stop. The scooter's with me for a minute. You tell me what happened, then you. What could work for both of you?"

Nemours KidsHealth gives the boundaries around it: step in when someone could get hurt, separate children until they are calm, and solve problems with your children, not for them. The American Academy of Pediatrics adds: acknowledge the conflict, avoid taking sides, and if it is about a toy, you can put the toy away.

What the words do

"The scooter's with me for a minute" takes the prize off the table without awarding it. "You tell me what happened, then you" gives each child a turn, in order, with no interrupting. "What could work for both of you?" hands the solving back. You are in charge of the steps, not the verdict. For when to stay out entirely, see the guide on when to step in to sibling fights.

If you live in two homes

Siblings who move between two homes together spend a lot of time in each other's space, including car rides at handover. If the fights cluster around switching days, that is worth noticing, not a sign either home is doing it wrong. Use the same mediation steps in your home; you don't need the other home to copy them.

In the UK

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 (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. 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.