What to say when your kids won't stop fighting

"My nine- and twelve-year-old fight about everything: the front seat, the remote, who looked at whom. When I step in, what do I actually say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"I don't care who started it. You're both grounded."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"Pause. Each of you gets to say what happened without being interrupted. Then you two make a plan you can both live with, and I'll check it."

A blanket punishment ends the noise and teaches nothing about the next front-seat argument. Deciding who is right works for a minute, until the child who lost the case reopens it.

What the research found

In a study of 48 families with children aged five to ten, families were randomly assigned either to training parents in a formal mediation procedure or to carrying on as usual. In mediation, the parent sets the ground rules, each child explains their side and their feelings, the children say back what the other one wants, and the children propose solutions. Afterwards, parents in the mediation group reported that their children used more constructive strategies, compromised more often and settled more of their conflicts themselves. When the researchers watched the children negotiate a recurring conflict on their own, there was less negativity, and the children understood their sibling's view better. An earlier study with children aged five to eight found that mothers could learn mediation and that children took part in it readily.

Nemours KidsHealth draws the line: step in when there is a danger of physical harm, separate children until they are calm, and resolve problems with them rather than for them.

What the words do

"Pause" stops it without a sentence passed. "Without being interrupted" is the one rule that makes the rest possible. "You two make a plan" puts the solving where the research put it, with the children, and "I'll check it" keeps you responsible for fairness. At nine and twelve they can do most of this; your job is to hold the steps every time, until they start doing it without you.

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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5. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
6. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
7. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
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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.