

LEARNING WHEN TO INTERVENE & COMPETITION BETWEEN SIBLINGS



Key Principles

- Setting limits
- Giving appropriate attention
- Encouraging contribution
- Understanding birth order

MEET... Stephanie, Henry, four-year-old Catalina and two-year-old Adrienne again. In *Episode 5*, when we first met this family, we learned that Stephanie and Henry are working on having reasonable expectations and setting limits. Now, Stephanie is learning to establish firm limits and follow through, as well as deal with conflict between her daughters.



Setting limits

In *Episode 5*, you imagined what life would be like without rules and routines. Most people will agree that without them, the world would be a confusing and frustrating place. Now imagine that there are rules and routines, but sometimes it's okay to ignore them. Is today the day you will get a ticket if you speed, or will the policeman at the corner let it slide this time? Most adults would admit that having a reasonably good chance of having a lucky "no-ticket" day would encourage them to speed. Children are surprisingly like us: If some of the time, your child can ignore a rule without consequence, you can bet he or she will often test to see if today is a lucky "no consequence" day. Having reasonable rules and setting limits requires following through to encourage your child to behave reasonably and responsibly. Setting limits is also like having rules and routines. When they are fair and reasonable, they provide children with a sense of security.

Giving appropriate attention

People are social animals who want—and need—to be recognized by and feel important in their group. Your child's primary social group is the family, and, as a result, much of your child's behavior is an effort to feel a part of the family unit. If your child feels recognized and appreciated by the group, he or she will usually become a cooperative member of the family. Children who don't feel recognized and appreciated will try hard to win attention, often in destructive or annoying ways. These efforts, though misdirected, have a positive source: the desire to belong and be appreciated. Parents can fall into a pattern of taking constructive behavior for granted while giving children a lot of attention when they behave badly. By giving positive attention as an ongoing part of family life and minimizing your response to problem behavior by acting quickly and firmly, you will teach your children that

it's fun and rewarding to be a cooperative member of the family where they can feel appreciated and influential.

Encouraging contribution

Children delight in making a contribution to, and having an influence in, the family. As we've just seen, even negative behavior is an effort to have influence in the family group. A large part of your role as a parent involves helping children grow into responsible, independent adults. Much of their success will depend on working with others and making a contribution at work, in the community and in the larger world. By encouraging your child to contribute to family life, you are doing two things at once. First, you are building a happy, productive home life where your child can learn new skills and build self-esteem. Secondly, you are presenting a model of constructive attitudes and behavior that your child can take into the world of school, friendships, recreational activities, and eventually, adult life.

Understanding birth order

Parents often wonder how two children in the same family can be so different. A child's genetic makeup contributes to his or her personality and behavior, but another important influence is the child's birth order in the family. The experience of the first-born is very different than the experience of the last-born or middle child. For example, the first born might be expected to help with the younger siblings. These experiences can make a child "grow up" quickly, perhaps making him or her super-responsible. On the other hand, the youngest might be the "baby" of the family that everyone helps, and thus be a bit less independent than an older brother or sister. Or consider the role in the family of an only child. This child might become very comfortable around adults and seek out the company of older friends. Competition between brothers and sisters is also common, as they try to get an important resource—the attention of their parents.



A CLOSER LOOK...

Applying key principles in this episode

Setting limits *Milk and Puzzles*

During Stephanie's afternoon at home with Catalina and Adrienne, the girls test her repeatedly. First, Catalina ignores her mother when she asks her to put her milk away in the refrigerator. Catalina is playing with her milk, and Stephanie is concerned that it will spill. When Stephanie tries to take the milk from Catalina, Catalina resists her physically. Eventually, Stephanie succeeds, but Catalina is angry and hits her mother. Stephanie continues to cook for a minute and then tells Catalina to go play. Catalina says, "No!" At this point, Stephanie feels things have gone too far, and she takes Catalina to her room. Catalina comes out and Stephanie puts her back in, telling her to stay until "Mommy" says she can come out.

While it might look clear to us that Catalina's behavior is unacceptable (she was uncooperative and hit her mother), Catalina probably does not see things as clearly. Stephanie has not stated a clear limit about playing with milk or hitting. If both are

unacceptable, as Stephanie thinks they are, she can clearly state this to Catalina, along with a consequence if the behavior occurs. Then she can feel comfortable following through quickly and firmly with the consequence if the unacceptable behavior occurs. It is reasonable to separate children who hit others from the rest of the group. If the goal, though, is to help children understand that hitting is not okay, they need to understand clearly why they are being separated. Just like us, children are not mind readers. Clearly explain the limit to the child (no hitting) and what will happen if they do hit (children who hit other people need to be someplace where they can't hit). With this knowledge, a child can make an informed choice. Often, it only takes a time or two of being clear about limits and firm with consequences before children choose to be cooperative and constructive. This is borne out by what happens later in the afternoon when the girls are using their puzzles. While Stephanie might have stepped in early during the first puzzle dispute, she did eventually remove the puzzles, telling the girls they could try again later. The next time the puzzles came out, the girls used them peacefully.

Giving appropriate attention

Opportunities Abound

Stephanie has many opportunities during the afternoon to give the girls attention. Some of the attention she gives is appropriate, helping the girls feel good about themselves and encouraging constructive activities. A particularly good example of this is the second time the girls use puzzles. By setting clear limits before the activity, Stephanie set up a situation in which the girls had a good chance of succeeding. The puzzle time ends with Stephanie congratulating the girls and sharing high-fives with them.



In a number of other situations, Stephanie gives attention that encourages the girls to continue negative behavior. When Stephanie takes Catalina to her room, she lingers and even asks Catalina if it is okay that she will be spending time alone in her room. Carrying out a consequence quickly and matter-of-factly lets the child know that behaving badly is not going to get them extra attention. Each time Adrienne gets on the table, Stephanie tells her to get down without enforcing a consequence when Adrienne stays on. Adrienne is getting attention for being on the table, with the added benefit that she doesn't even have to get down. Minimal attention here would be most appropriate. Since Adrienne knows she should not be on the table, Stephanie can minimize giving her attention by quickly picking her up and putting her in a safe place. If Adrienne gets up again, Stephanie can remove her from the kitchen. Since Stephanie has told Adrienne several times to get off the table, Adrienne certainly knows the rule. Minimizing attention given for negative behavior and cultivating opportunities to give positive attention will help your child make responsible choices.



Encouraging contribution

Putting Dishes Away

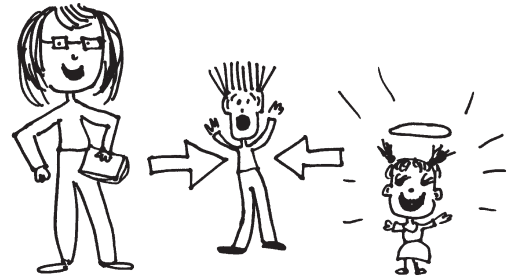
If there is any doubt about a child's deep desire to make a contribution to her social group, Adrienne's happy, cooperative demeanor as she helps Stephanie unload the dishwasher should be proof enough. Certainly, Stephanie could have emptied the

dishwasher more quickly by herself. But here is an opportunity to build her relationship with Adrienne, teach Adrienne new skills, and let Adrienne know that her contribution is recognized and appreciated. Taking this kind of time with your child and expressing your appreciation will pay big dividends for your child and for the relationship between the two of you.

Understanding birth order

The Grass Is Always Greener on the Other Side

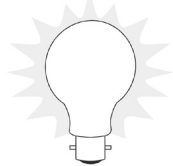
You read earlier that there is often a natural competition that crops up between siblings. This can express itself in many different ways. In *Episode 6*, Adrienne, the younger sister, wants to get her hands on her older sister's stuff. Adrienne has her own puzzle, but Catalina's looks so much more desirable. After all, Catalina is older and bigger and can do a lot more than



Adrienne. If only Adrienne could use her bigger sister's toys! Parents can channel this kind of sibling rivalry in constructive ways. For example, Stephanie might tell Catalina that Adrienne looks up to her so much, she wants to do what Catalina is doing. Stephanie could suggest that Catalina spend five minutes sharing her puzzle with her younger sister. This could build up Catalina's importance and let Adrienne feel she got to do "big girl" stuff. But then, it's important to ensure that Catalina gets uninterrupted time with her own toys. This would send an important message to both girls about sharing *and* each girl's right to have control over their own time and toys.

Action Guidelines from This Episode

- Taking time to help children learn how to contribute builds a strong relationship.
- Keep rules consistent for younger as well as older children.
- Older children need times when they don't have to deal with their younger siblings.
- Recognize when children are unable to solve their problems and intervene promptly.



YOUR TURN

What would you do?

1. Do you have "no-ticket days" for your child? If so, pick one area where you would like to see improvement and calmly and matter-of-factly enforce the rules that have been established.
2. Look for all the big and small ways your child is being constructive and comment on them. Watch to see if limit-testing diminishes.