

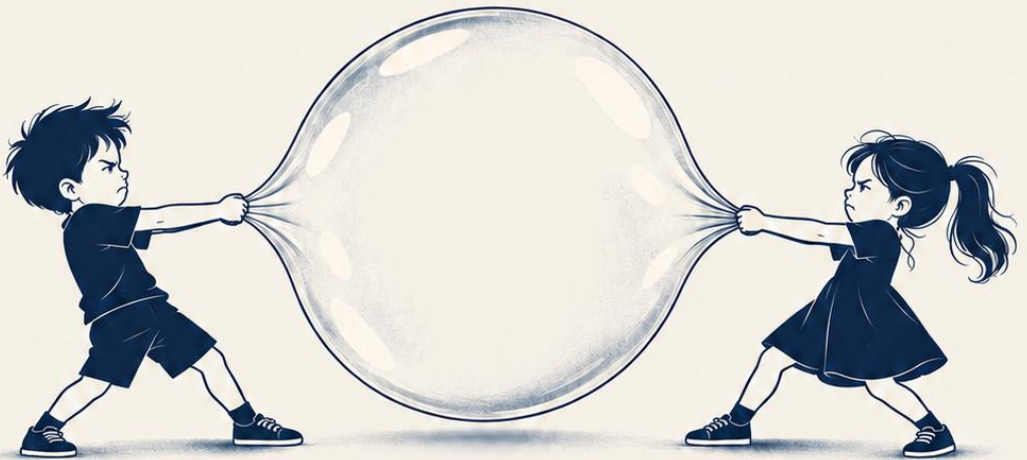
Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

The Kids Are Fighting Over Air Again

How to respond to sibling conflicts, teach them to work things out, and avoid becoming a full-time referee for everything



**We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.**

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INTRO

The self-checkout has asked you to place an item in the bagging area for the third time. The item is already there. One child is holding a cucumber like a microphone, while the other insists it was their turn to scan it, even though neither child had expressed the slightest interest in cucumbers until the scanner became available. You try to divide the remaining groceries fairly. Unfortunately, the remaining groceries include one carton of milk and a bag of onions, which the children consider wildly unequal scanning opportunities. A store employee approaches to help with the machine and finds you conducting a separate hearing about who touched the screen first. You came in for dinner ingredients. You may leave with those, plus an unpaid position as Chief Justice of Produce.

At home, the object changes but the job follows you. A child calls from the hallway because their sibling has moved a shoe, looked at a drawing, or hummed in a way that was "obviously on purpose." Both tell the story at once. Both want you to declare the other person responsible, preferably before you have learned what happened. You make a decision, one child objects, and five minutes later a new case arrives with supporting evidence from last Tuesday. Telling them to sort it out themselves sounds appealing until you hear something being pulled, slammed, or broken. Stepping in every time is exhausting, but walking away from everything is no answer either. Somehow, the person who only wanted to put groceries away has become an entire appeals system.

The maddening part is that many of these fights begin with something small enough to fit in a pocket. Their effects do not stay small. One child feels that their belongings are never safe; another thinks they only get heard by raising their voice. A parent who is tired of judging may choose whichever answer ends the noise fastest, then feel uneasy about it later. Children also notice which strategies work: calling you first, speaking louder, giving in, or producing a detailed account of a sibling's previous offenses. They are learning how to handle disagreements, but not necessarily the lesson you meant to teach. If every dispute ends with your ruling, they have little reason to try a workable request before filing the next complaint. The household can grow remarkably efficient at summoning a referee and no better at sharing a hallway.

This is not a book about making siblings adore each other on command. They can be close, irritated, protective, competitive, generous, and unwilling to lend a particular pen, sometimes before lunch. Nor is every argument secretly a valuable teaching moment that deserves a twenty-minute discussion. When one child is hitting, threatening, frightening, or repeatedly overpowering another, your job is to stop the behavior and protect the child who needs help. A disagreement over whose turn it is to choose a game calls for a different response. Treating both situations alike is unfair to everyone, including the parent trying to decide what to do while holding a bag of melting groceries. The first useful skill is recognizing when children need your authority and when they need your help using their own voices.

You may already have tried the familiar shortcuts. "Take turns" leaves everyone asking how long a turn lasts. "Both of you apologize" produces two words, neither of which repairs

a damaged thing or makes an unwanted joke stop. "If you fight over it, nobody gets it" can end the immediate struggle while leaving one child wondering why asking you for help cost them their own property. These reactions are understandable; they are quick, and parents often have about twelve seconds before something on the stove requires attention. The trouble is that a quick ending and a useful resolution are not always the same. We will look at what each shortcut misses, then put practical alternatives in its place. No one needs a complicated family constitution to decide who gets the cucumber.

The alternatives start with ordinary questions and actions. What is happening now, rather than who can deliver the longest history of what happened before? Is the issue a personal possession, a shared resource, an unwanted touch, a broken agreement, or two plans that cannot both happen at once? What can each child actually do next? Sometimes you will state a firm boundary; sometimes you will help one child make a clear request and the other answer it. Sometimes you will make a temporary adult decision because there is no time to reach an agreement. A good method should still work when someone is disappointed, because disappointment is not a sign that the method has failed. It should also have a smaller version for the evening when you have the energy to say one clear sentence, not lead a seminar in conflict resolution.

We will pay attention to the children who do not make the most noise. The one who always says "fine" may genuinely not mind, or may have learned that objecting costs more than giving in. The older child may be asked to surrender everything because they are easier to reason with; the younger may need help waiting without being handed

whatever they demand. A child who says a joke has stopped being funny should not have to prove that the joke was objectively terrible. These distinctions matter more than a rule that sounds perfectly equal from the kitchen doorway. You do not need to read minds or diagnose anyone to notice patterns, ask privately, and protect a boundary. You do need to remain willing to change your first impression when the quieter part of the story becomes visible.

Your circumstances matter too. There will be disputes in the car, where you cannot turn around to investigate and still drive safely. There will be fights just as a guest arrives, when the guest would rather not serve as the deciding vote in your family's internal affairs. There will be days when your own patience is nearly gone and the beautifully worded sentence you planned has vanished from memory. The goal is not flawless parenting under laboratory conditions. It is to have a few reliable moves, know what to simplify when you are stretched, and recognize when a problem needs more support than a household rule can provide. Children will still disagree. You can reduce the number of disagreements that require you to run the entire conversation from opening statements to final judgment.

For now, picture the next ordinary summons: "Tell her to stop!" Before deciding who wins, check that everyone is safe and find out what needs to stop or change right now. You may need to step in firmly. You may need to stay nearby while the children speak to each other. You may discover that they already have an idea and require only enough space to try it. None of those responses requires you to enjoy the argument, and none depends on a sudden outbreak of sibling harmony. They give you a place to start while real life carries on around the dispute. The cucumber

can wait in the bagging area for a moment. It has, after all, been remarkably patient throughout the proceedings.

Chapter 1 - Before You Ask Who Started

A cardboard city occupies the living-room floor. One child has spent an hour drawing roads around cereal-box buildings; the other needs a box for a spaceship and reaches for the tallest tower. The tower comes away, the road tears, and the first child grabs it back hard enough to flatten the spaceship's nose. You arrive to find two red faces, one ripped sheet of paper, and a cardboard object whose identity is now a matter of international dispute. "Who started it?" seems like the obvious opening. Within seconds, you have competing histories that begin yesterday, possibly last Thursday, and, according to one witness, at birth. Meanwhile the torn road is still on the floor and both children are reaching for the same box. The first useful question is smaller: "What needs to stop or be protected right now?"

That question gives you somewhere to stand without pretending you saw the whole event. In a sibling fight, the loudest moment is often the last link in a chain. The child holding the box may have taken it without asking; the child pulling it back may have used too much force. A verdict based on the instant you entered can reward the person who caused the trouble quietly and punish the person whose objection made a noise. Children notice that. They also become remarkably skilled at arranging for an adult to arrive at the precise moment their sibling looks furious. You do not need to become a detective with a floor plan and a reenactment. You need to stop any harm, establish what you can actually see, and decide which part requires an adult.

Start with safety, before fairness. If someone is being hit, held down, threatened, cornered, or hurt by an object,

separate the children and attend to the person at risk. Say what you are doing in plain language: "I'm moving this box because it's being swung near your face," or "I'm putting space between you." A child does not have to explain the history of the dispute before you protect them. Likewise, "They both looked angry" does not make a frightening situation mutual. If one child repeatedly intimidates another, ordinary coaching between equals is insufficient; the adult must protect the child being targeted and seek appropriate professional support when the pattern persists or safety is uncertain. Save the jokes for the cardboard architecture. Fear is not a teaching aid.

When no one is in danger, name observations rather than motives. "The road is torn, you are both holding the tower, and I'm putting it on the shelf for a moment" is usable. "You always wreck your sister's projects because you're jealous" asks a child to defend a character assessment while the cardboard city continues its decline. Even a flattering guess can cause trouble: "I know you didn't mean it" may leave the child with the damaged work feeling that the impact has been dismissed. Your observations can be modest. You have eyes, a torn drawing, and perhaps twenty seconds before dinner boils over. That is enough to stop the pulling and preserve the materials. It is not enough to write a complete family history, however much the children seem prepared to dictate one.

Next, separate the pieces of the problem. Who owns or was using the object? What happened to it? What does each child need now? In our living room, the road belongs to the child who was drawing it, and the tower was part of that ongoing project. The other child's wish for a spaceship box is real, but it does not turn the tower into an available supply.

You can return it to the project and offer another box, or ask whether there is one when the builder is finished. You need not declare one child wholly innocent to say, "Taking a piece from someone's work without asking stops now." If the child who grabbed it back also struck or frightened someone, address that separately. A boundary can be specific without becoming a lifelong title such as "the selfish one."

There is a reason to keep these pieces apart. Adults often compress an entire quarrel into one score: who was worse? Then they distribute consequences as though all actions cancel one another out. "You took it, but you shouted, so you're even" sounds tidy and teaches almost nothing. Taking the tower and pulling it back roughly call for different responses. The first calls for returning what was taken and finding another way to ask. The second may call for making space and practising how to reclaim an object without hurting someone. Neither lesson requires pretending the first action never happened. A sibling relationship is not a game in which one bad move gives the other player unlimited credits for retaliation.

Ask for accounts when the children can speak, and keep the questions narrow. "What were you using?" and "What did you want to do?" will usually tell you more than "Why would you do such a thing?" Let each child finish a short answer without the other providing live corrections from three inches away. If they interrupt, move them apart or say, "You'll get a turn; I'm listening to this answer first." You are collecting enough information to act, not running a hearing in which the most eloquent child wins custody of the cereal box. A younger child may struggle to sequence events, while an older one can offer a beautifully structured account with