

## Kids Fighting: Let Them Be

You know the scene: two toddlers suddenly go for the same toy and there's a bit of a scuffle and then one child wins and the other starts crying. Or perhaps they're a bit older and one child wants something from the other and some words are said, there may be a smack or two (between children), and the event is over.

The problem is that these events almost always have an additional element to them: adult interference. We can't seem to help ourselves and so get down on our knees and try to *reason* or *socialize* our children into behaving like little adults. Sometimes we get a nice smack in the face for it, sometimes we get a grudging "sorry" from one child to another, but in our efforts we are actually missing something quite important. That something is how children naturally learn to be social. For all our efforts, we are often actually doing things that *take away* from our children's socialization rather than add to it.

The following is a scenario that is actually a composite of many I have heard over the years (and experienced):

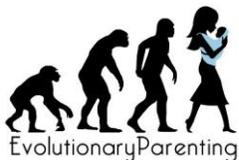
*A young girl (Girl A) is happily playing with some toys at the park when another girl (Girl B) comes up and says she wants to play with Girl A. Girl A is quite happy on her own and tells the girl that she does not wish to play with her at this time. Girl B gets upset and declares that they are friends and so they have to share together. Girl A says no quite loudly, getting upset that she can't just play on her own. Girl B hits Girl A (but not too hard) while Girl A says, "I don't like you!" Girl B goes to turn away and leave, but an adult, having seen what is going on, comes over to 'help' the girls.*

*The adult asks what happens and Girl B says, "Girl A won't share!" and Girl A says, "Girl B hit me!" Now, being a good adult, the adult looks to Girl B and says, "Remember, we don't hit. Hitting hurts people." She then turns to Girl A and says, "Now you remember that we share here. We share with our friends." Girl A retorts, "She's not my friend!" and the adult says, "Yes she is. We're all friends here. Why don't we all say sorry?" The two girls grudgingly say "sorry" and the adult walks away, quite pleased with how it was handled.*

In many ways, us adults tend to think this is how we should intervene to help our kids see the errors of their ways. The problem is that what the children have learned and what we want them to learn are not necessarily the same thing.

So what have the girls learned in the above scenario thanks to this adult interference?

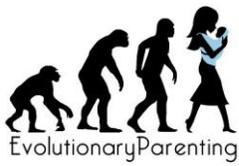
1. Girl A has learned that she does not have any claim to items she is playing with. The reminder to share is a natural one for us adults, but it is not only not how the world works, but is contrary to how children learn to share. Research tells us that when we force kids to share, they actually end up sharing *less* in the long run.



2. Girl B has learned that she is allowed to lay claim to anything someone else is playing with. This is the other side effect of the “sharing” issue: A child who demands to play with what another child is playing with is actually rewarded when we tell the other child they have to share. This is qualitatively different than hearing they have to wait until the first child is done which allows for kids to play at their own pace and learn that sometimes they have to wait.
3. Girl A has learned her feelings don’t matter. Whenever we tell a child that their own experiences or feelings aren’t reality, we are negating the entire child and helping them doubt their feelings at all other times. Girl A said, “She’s not my friend!” and was subsequently told, “Yes she is.” This is a classic example of an adult telling a child that the adult knows more about the child’s internal state than the child herself. Again, this is different than acknowledging the emotion behind such statements (e.g., “I can tell you’re very angry right now”) and proceeding to act based on respecting the current emotional state and letting it pass.
4. Girl B has been led to believe that she is bad. You see, when our children respond in a certain way (e.g., hitting) and we focus on the negative of the act without acknowledging the emotions behind it as valid, children (and adults) often internalize this to be about *them*. Girl B has not had someone acknowledge her hurt feelings and helped her find a way around it, she simply was told that she was wrong. Children aren’t good at separating out comments about their actions and them when they are not explicit.
5. Both girls learned that forgiveness is forced and not something to actually feel and act on. No one should believe that either girl meant “sorry”, but because the words (however hollow) came out of their mouths, they were given the freedom to go on their way and nothing more would be said about it. This doesn’t promote thinking about wrongdoings, but instead promotes self-centered reflection.

These are not (hopefully) the lessons that anyone wants the kids to learn. But now let us consider what would happen if the adults didn’t intervene in the fight, but instead left any involvement for emotional support *after the fact*... what would the children learn then?

1. Both girls would be given time to let the high emotions blow over and could focus on the emotional states underlying the exchange with or without adult assistance. Depending on the child, this could mean they have the time to reflect on how someone else was feeling or how they now feel once the anger has passed. Many kids will spontaneously apologize when given the space and time, showing they have internalized remorse, but cannot call it to action as quickly as we would like.
2. Girl A would know she hurt Girl B based on the act of being hit. Someone hits us and we know they are angry at us and hopefully we try to figure out what we did. It doesn’t excuse the hitting as being ‘okay’ but it does help us understand our own involvement in the matter.
3. Girl B would learn she can’t bully someone into doing what she wants. Girl A was standing her ground and despite Girl B wanting her to play with her, Girl A wasn’t interested. It may sound harsh, but learning that sometimes other people want to do things without you is an important lesson.
4. Girl B would also learn that hitting hurts. The immediate reaction of “I don’t like you!” is one way that she will internalize that hitting leads to social rejection. If she keeps it up, this social rejection



will continue. Luckily, most children learn quickly that hitting doesn't get them the desired outcome and for those who don't, this is when adults need to step in *away* from the moment to work on these skills and help the child learn other ways to cope with in-the-moment anger.

5. Finally, both girls would have likely been friends again by the end of the day instead of having other emotions and thoughts that may compromise that friendship in the future. They would have had an experience of working through an event on their own which also would have built up their confidence in their social skills, based on the lessons learned from that moment (and many more).

Oddly, most childhood fights involve children exploding at each other, taking a moment, forgiving each other (explicitly or implicitly), and moving on. Exactly what we want from them. In fact, they are often better at this than us adults are. Yet we get involved and take this train off-track because it doesn't look like our idealized version of no one ever getting angry. The problem is that we cannot ignore that people get angry and we can't let our own discomfort with that get in the way of what is best for our children.

One final note: there are times when you need to intervene, but they will be in the minority for most of us (depending on your job). Most of the time, any intervention would be to support emotions after the fight and (if needed) help the child see the perspective of the other person. That's it. However, if someone is looking to get seriously hurt (not just a hit) then you have to step in. Safety is first, but we have to be reasonable on safety as kids will be kids and lash out and our job is not to stifle all forms of acting out. We also may need to intervene if there is bullying going on which happens in ever-younger children. Stepping in when a child is being bullied helps that child know they aren't alone and that is imperative. Whether the bullying is physical or social, we need to ensure we don't allow that to become normal.

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