WHO STARTED IT

Why Your Kids Fight, and What Actually Works

The Behavioral Science of Sibling Conflict

For Parents of Kids 5 to 12

Emery Sol, BCBA, LMFT

Copyright © 2026 by Emery Sol

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Published by Emery Sol

First edition, 2026

Disclaimer

This book is intended to provide general information about sibling relationships and child behavior and is not a substitute for professional assessment, diagnosis, treatment, or individualized safety planning. Reading it does not create a clinical relationship of any kind between the reader and the author.

The children and families described are composites. They do not depict any actual person, and any resemblance to a real individual is coincidental.

If you are concerned about your child's behavior, development, mental health, or safety, consult a qualified professional. Chapter Nine describes situations in which outside assessment may be appropriate. If you believe a child or anyone in your household is at immediate risk of harm, contact local emergency services or another appropriate emergency resource.

The author and publisher disclaim any liability arising directly or indirectly from the use of this book.

Introduction

It is a little after five. The oven is on, there is a dinner to get on the table, and your two children are in the next room. For a while after you got home they were fine. You heard the television, and then you heard one of them laughing at something.

Then something starts. It is about the remote, or the chair by the radiator, or which of them was standing in front of the refrigerator when the other one wanted to get in. You can hear it building from where you are standing. There is a stretch where it could go either way, and you keep doing what you are doing because it might still go the other way, and then it does not. One of them raises their voice. The other one raises theirs. Something gets shoved or something gets grabbed, and you put down what you are holding and you go in.

They both start talking at the same time. You get two accounts. The accounts do not agree about anything, including who was sitting where, and both children are certain. You ask who started it. You get two more accounts. At some point you make a ruling, because you have a dinner to get on the table and because somebody has to, and one of them takes it badly and the other one looks pleased in a way that is going to cost you before the evening is out.

A little while later it happens again, about something else.

By the time everyone is at the table you have made several rulings. Later you tell someone about it, and you hear yourself using the word constant, and you wonder briefly whether that is fair to them, and then you remember the count.

If you have ever kept any kind of count, you know it is not two or three times a day. And you have probably noticed something that

does not make much sense, and put it aside because there was nothing useful to do with it. It does not happen like this at your mother's house. It did not happen on the Saturday you were out for the afternoon and came home braced for the report and were told, without much interest, that it had been fine.

You have tried things. Almost everyone has tried things by the time they pick up a book like this one. You have separated them. You have sat them down and explained that they are going to be in each other's lives longer than they are going to be in anyone else's. You have taken away the thing they were fighting over, and then taken away the next thing. You have tried being scrupulously fair, and you have tried refusing to get involved, which lasted a few days. Some of it worked for a while. None of it kept working.

Frequent fighting does not, by itself, mean you have raised children who dislike each other or failed to teach them how to share. It may mean that one familiar way of ending arguments has become unusually effective in your house.

The rest of this book is about what that way is, why it has worked, and what to put in its place.

What happens in the minute after you walk in

Behavior is shaped, in part, by what reliably follows it. The principle applies to ordinary human habits as well as to the ways children learn to end difficult interactions. It does not tell you everything about a fight, but it gives you a useful place to look.

So the question worth adding to who started it is: what does fighting reliably produce in this house?

In many families, one recurring result is an adult. The adult arrives, listens, separates, decides, reassures, or removes the disputed thing. Any of those outcomes may matter. The useful question is not

whether every fight is 'for attention,' but whether the same adult response keeps appearing at the end of the same kind of conflict.

That Saturday matters because the pattern changed when the conditions changed. The same children had access to the same television and the same good chair, but there was no adult immediately available to hear a case or issue a ruling. That does not prove why they fought less. It gives the family a useful hypothesis to test: adult involvement may be part of what makes escalation more worthwhile on weekday evenings.

None of that makes the parent the cause. Parents step in because children are loud, because someone may get hurt, because dinner has to happen, and because intervening often ends the immediate problem. Those are reasonable responses. The useful question is whether a response that solves tonight's problem has also become part of the pattern that brings everyone back to the same problem tomorrow.

The adult response is therefore worth studying. It is not the only influence on sibling conflict, but it is one of the few parts of the sequence a parent can deliberately change.

Age gap, temperament, neurodevelopmental differences, anxiety, sleep, sensory needs, learning difficulties, family stress, and the history between two children can all shape what happens. A behavioral account does not replace those explanations. It asks a narrower question: given everything else that is true, what happens before and after this particular pattern, and what changes when those conditions change?

There is another reason refereeing is difficult to stop: it works for the parent too. When you walk in and settle the dispute, the noise often drops quickly. On a tired Tuesday, that immediate relief matters. Any plan that ignores what the old arrangement was doing for the adult is unlikely to survive the first difficult week.

What the children receive can also be more specific than the word attention suggests. They may get several uninterrupted minutes with an adult, a chance to give an account, a binding decision, help getting a sibling out of a room, or simply an end to an interaction they cannot end themselves. Different children can be getting different things from the same fight.

The book keeps returning to this possibility: conflict can become a reliable route to outcomes that matter to both children and to the adult who ends it. Once that route is visible, the family can test whether a different one works better.

Not all sibling conflict fits this pattern. Children fight with no audience, over genuinely scarce things, because they are tired, because they misread each other, and for reasons a parent may never be able to reconstruct. The behavioral lens is most useful as a hypothesis: observe the pattern, change one variable carefully, and see whether the pattern changes with it.

Six children, three pairs

Three families run through this book. They are composites rather than portraits of actual households, and they are here because behavioral principles become much easier to use when they are attached to ordinary rooms, routines, and relationships.

Tobin is ten and Callie is eight, in fifth and third grade. They live with their mother and father, and their nine-year-old cousin Mara stays most weekends.

Their fighting is frequent, low grade, and two-directional: the back seat of the car, the good chair by the radiator, who was handed the remote first. It often begins as needling, with one child repeating an ordinary word in a particular voice while the other says stop, and can arrive at shoving with no clean step anyone can identify

afterward. Their mother says that on a bad evening there may be four separate incidents in the half hour before dinner. By the time an adult enters, both children are usually in the middle of it, so neither account is a simple record of who began.

One Tuesday at six, Callie is in the chair with her feet up on the arm. Tobin comes in from the kitchen with a bowl of cereal, stands in front of the television, and barely moves when she asks him to. She asks again, louder. He says something about the chair not being hers, then repeats it in the voice where the words are ordinary and the delivery is not. By the time their mother reaches the doorway, Callie is out of the chair and Tobin is in it with the bowl; Callie says she was there first and he did it on purpose, while Tobin says she got up.

Their mother rules that getting up means giving it up, which is a defensible rule and one she has used before. A little later Callie is in the kitchen reporting that Tobin said something under his breath.

When the family moved two years ago, the new house had a bedroom for each child. Tobin and Callie asked to share and still want to, which matters because it removes the most obvious solution before the book begins.

Tobin collects bus timetables. He can tell you what time the 41 leaves from outside the library on a Sunday, and he is usually right. Callie is the fastest swimmer in her lane group and is up and dressed before anyone else in the house twice a week, which nobody in that family has ever had to enforce.

Penny is twelve and Ansel is six, in seventh and first grade. They live with their mother and father, and their father works away Tuesday through Thursday most weeks.

Ansel comes into rooms that Penny is in. He puts his hands flat on her homework while she is doing it. He follows her and her friend

from the kitchen to the stairs and back. Penny's escalation is not physical and never has been. She says something, quietly, and it lands, and Ansel cries, and by the time their mother arrives Penny is looking at her homework and saying she did not say anything. What their mother walks into, most evenings, is a crying six-year-old and a twelve-year-old with a blank face, and there is no version of that scene in which Penny comes out of it well.

On one Wednesday, with their father away, Penny is working at the kitchen table because her own room is cold and the radiator has needed bleeding since last winter. Ansel comes in and puts both hands flat on the sheet she is using. She tells him to get off; he lifts his hands and puts them back down. After saying his name once, she tells him he is the reason her friends have stopped coming over.

Their mother is in the front room and hears the crying before she hears anything else. What she finds is Ansel with his face in his sleeve and Penny turning a page. She asks what happened. Ansel cannot get a sentence out. Penny says she did not say anything, which is what she says, and which is not true, and which her mother can do nothing with, because the only other witness is six years old and crying. Penny goes upstairs before anyone asks her to. That evening ends with their mother sitting with Ansel and not speaking to Penny again before bed.

Penny runs cross-country. She is out of the house at six on Saturday mornings without being asked twice. Ansel has been learning to ride a bike without training wheels since March, on a stretch of sidewalk outside the house, and he has not stopped trying, and this is the thing his mother mentions first when anyone asks about him.

Kofi is eleven and Wren is seven, in sixth and second grade. Both parents work, and their grandmother, who lives two streets away, picks them up on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Wren goes into Kofi's room and takes things. Much of the time, little that an adult can see happens afterward. Kofi may absorb it for hours or days. On a smaller number of occasions he reacts visibly: he shoves her, or takes something of hers and holds it where she cannot reach it, and she screams, and an adult arrives to an eleven-year-old doing something to a seven-year-old.

Kofi gets the consequence. He has gotten the consequence nearly every time since he was nine. His parents are not careless people and they are not unfair people; they are responding to what is in front of them when they walk in, which is the last thing that happened rather than the first. Kofi stopped telling them about any of it in October. His mother has noticed that he has become private lately and has been giving him room, which is a kind and reasonable reading of it.

The fifth time happened in September. Kofi has a half-built model on the shelf in his room, the kind that takes months. While he is out on his bike, Wren goes in, removes one piece, slips it into her pocket, and goes downstairs. The house stays quiet for the rest of the afternoon.

He notices at seven. He does not tell anyone, because he has told them four times and he knows what telling produces. He goes downstairs, takes her rabbit off the sofa, and holds it above his head where she cannot reach it. When she screams, their father is in the room at once.

What their father sees is an eleven-year-old holding a seven-year-old's rabbit over her head while she screams. He is not wrong about what he sees. Kofi loses the tablet. Nobody in that house ever finds out about the piece from the model, and Kofi does not build any more of it that month.

Kofi cooks. He makes the family breakfast on Saturdays, all of it, and has done since he was ten. Wren has memorized a long stretch

of a book she likes and will recite it to anyone who sits still long enough, including the mail carrier.

None of these six children is being reduced to a diagnosis or a role in the family. Wren is more than the child who enters Kofi's room, and Penny is more than the older sister whose words can hurt. Two families make meaningful progress in the book; one ends it still waiting for professional input.

What this book assumes—and what it does not

Birth order appears in popular explanations of sibling relationships far more confidently than the research supports. This book therefore does not use 'firstborn,' 'middle child,' or 'youngest' as explanations for a particular fight. Those labels may describe a family structure; they do not tell you what is maintaining a behavior on Tuesday evening.

The same is true of the idea that siblings fight because they are competing for a parent's love. Feelings of rivalry, exclusion, and unequal treatment can be real and important. Acknowledging those feelings, avoiding comparison, and taking each child's experience seriously remain good parenting practices. This book adds another layer: even in a caring, emotionally attuned household, the practical consequences that follow a fight can still shape what happens next time.

Throughout the book, relationship, development, and behavior are treated as parts of the same picture rather than competing explanations. The useful question is which part helps the family decide what to do next.

This book also does not diagnose your children. ADHD, autism, anxiety, learning differences, trauma, sleep problems, sensory needs, and other developmental or mental-health factors can affect

sibling conflict and may deserve assessment in their own right. Where the pattern raises that possibility, Chapter 9 explains when outside input becomes appropriate without guessing at a diagnosis.

There is no branded method here. The changes are intentionally ordinary: a short request, a protected boundary, a different response to a disputed object, a quieter transition, a change in timing. What matters is whether the new arrangement is easier to use and more workable for the family than the old one.

Change is also usually uneven. The families here improve over months rather than transforming in a weekend, and one ends the book waiting for professional input. Their progress is intentionally incomplete because family change often is.

Nor can this book promise what your children will feel about each other as adults. Frequent conflict now is worth addressing because it affects life now. It is not a reliable forecast of whether two siblings will be close twenty years from now.

Before you use the practical chapters

The practical chapters are written for sibling conflict in which both children participate over time, even if their contributions look different in any single incident. Before reducing adult involvement, make sure that is the pattern you are actually dealing with.

Pause and move to Chapter 9 first if the conflict consistently runs one way; if injuries are recurring or significant; if intimidation, coercion, or a clear power imbalance is present; if similar aggression is showing up in other settings; or if one child is changing where they go, what they do, or when they move through the house in order to avoid the other. Those features do not establish a diagnosis, but they raise a different safety question.

A single injury does not, by itself, tell you what the whole sibling relationship is. It still matters. Treat the injury, increase supervision as needed, and then look at the broader pattern rather than using either the blood or the absence of blood as the entire test.

Chapter 9 also covers repair, including how to address harm without requiring an apology on command.

Throughout the book, stepping back from refereeing never means stepping back from supervision or safety. If someone is being hurt, frightened, trapped, or unable to get away, the adult goes in. The intervention is about declining the courtroom role, not declining the protective one.

Who this is for

This book is for parents and caregivers of two or more children roughly between five and twelve, in households where sibling conflict is frequent enough to be shaping how everyone feels about being home.

The examples happen to include three two-parent households, but the principles do not depend on that structure. Single-parent homes, blended and stepfamilies, split-household arrangements, grandparents, and other regular caregivers may need more coordination because the same conflict can meet different responses in different places. Where adults disagree, consistency of the practical plan matters more than everyone sharing the same theory.

The book is not written for children under five. Some learning principles are similar, but the language, supervision needs, and developmental expectations would need a different treatment.

And it is not a substitute for assessment when a child's safety, development, mental health, or functioning raises concerns beyond ordinary sibling conflict.

The chapters move from observation to intervention on purpose. Chapters 1 and 2 help you see the sequence before you change it. Chapter 3 builds alternatives. Chapter 4 prepares you for the possibility that the old pattern may intensify or change when the response changes. Chapters 5 through 8 deal with timing, asymmetry, fairness, and generalization. Chapter 9 separates ordinary conflict from patterns that need a different level of protection or professional input.

None of the three families is finished at the end. Tobin and Callie's evenings cost less time and still contain arguments. Penny and Ansel use their new boundaries inconsistently. Kofi begins telling his parents more often, but the family still has unanswered questions.

The book is aiming for improvement on that scale: less mystery, less cost, safer and more workable responses, and fewer disagreements that require a parent to reconstruct every detail before anyone can move on.

Chapter One
Why They Fight More When You're Home

Tobin is ten and Callie is eight, and the half hour before dinner is the worst part of their mother's day.

She is at the stove. The children are in the front room across the hall, with the television and the good chair, and there is no line of sight between the two rooms. That detail matters: for the worst half hour of the evening, she can hear both children and see neither of them.

She started keeping count in the fall, not as a project but because she wanted to settle something with herself. Everyone she complained to said that siblings fight, which is true but not very useful when you are trying to decide what is happening in your own house. She could not tell whether their pattern was ordinary or unusually costly. So she started counting.

On a bad evening it was four. The remote, the chair, and twice about who was standing in front of the refrigerator when the other one wanted to get into it. Each one began as needling, which in that house has a sound to it, one of them repeating a word in a particular voice while the other says stop. Each one arrived at shoving or grabbing with no step in between that anyone could identify afterward. And each one ended the same way, which is that she put down the colander and went across the hall.

One of the four happened on a Tuesday.

Callie is in the chair with a book she is not reading, and the television is on. Tobin comes in from the kitchen and stands in front of it. Callie tells him to move. He moves, barely, so that he is

still in front of about half of it. She tells him again and he says that she can move if she does not like it, and then he says it again in the voice, the one where the words are ordinary and the delivery is not. Callie puts her feet down on the floor. Tobin says the thing about the chair not having her name on it. She stands up to get past him, and he takes the chair.

From the kitchen, all their mother can hear is the pitch changing. She does not hear the sentence about the chair, and she does not know that Callie stood up in order to get past him rather than to leave. She hears a shout, and then a shout on top of it, and then something knocked over. She turns the burner down and goes across the hall, and by the time she is in the doorway both of her children are talking at once and the only physical fact available to her is that Tobin is in the chair and Callie is not.

She makes a decision about the chair because dinner is in ten minutes and one of them has to sit somewhere. She is deciding from incomplete evidence, which means any ruling risks missing something that happened before she entered the room.

The other three look about the same. By the time everyone sits down she has ruled three more times on evidence she did not have, and she is the only person at that table for whom the last half hour has been work.

She has tried a number of things about this. She has tried explaining the chair situation in advance, on a Sunday, when everyone was calm and reasonable and agreed. She has tried removing the chair from the equation by putting a blanket on the sofa and calling it the other good seat. She has tried telling them she is not getting involved, which lasted a few days and ended the evening one of them was on the floor.

On the Thursday she had a meeting and her husband made dinner instead, standing at the same stove in the same kitchen at the same hour, the count was four.

The count matters here. Changing which parent stood at the stove did not change the number: it was still four.

And on the Saturday the two of them were out at a yard sale until eleven, with Mara staying over and the three children in the house alone, there was nothing. She asked when she got back, because she was braced for the report. She got a shrug. They had been in the yard.

What the Saturday was evidence of

An understandable reading is that her children can behave when they choose to and simply choose not to when she is there. That interpretation can be painful because it makes the fighting feel aimed at the parent.

The Thursday and Saturday do not prove that the fighting is aimed at an available adult, but they make that explanation worth testing. Changing the parent did not change the count; removing an immediately available adult did. That pattern is more informative than assuming the children simply chose to behave differently.

Behavior is shaped by what follows it. That is a foundational finding in learning research, but it is not a complete theory of children or of sibling conflict. Here it gives the family one practical question to test: which outcomes repeatedly follow this particular pattern?

A more useful question about the half hour before dinner is what shouting in the front room at that time has repeatedly produced.

In Tobin and Callie's house, one reliable result has been their mother arriving. Many families will find some version of adult

involvement in their own records; others will find a different pattern.

It does not happen every time. Sometimes she is on the phone, sometimes the children stop before she arrives, and sometimes she waits longer than usual. Intermittent outcomes can produce persistent behavior in many learning contexts, but the practical point here is simpler: do not assume a pattern has no effect merely because it is inconsistent. Record what actually happens in your house.

On Saturday morning, the children reported nothing worth mentioning. That does not prove there was no disagreement. It tells the family that the weekday pattern did not show up in the same way when the adult context changed.

In the fall, Tobin and Callie's mother took the chair out of the front room. Not as a punishment, and she told them so. She carried it upstairs to the landing and said that if the chair was going to cost the family this much then the family could manage without it for a while, and both children took this better than she expected.

The chair went away. The half hour did not change. What happened instead was that the incidents relocated, to the remote and to the doorway of the refrigerator and to a particular corner of the sofa that had never been contested before and now was. She brought the chair back down after two weeks because there was no longer any reason not to.

Removing the chair removed one occasion for conflict without changing the larger pattern. When the outcome attached to escalation remains available, conflict can shift to a different object or moment. That possibility is worth testing before concluding that the disputed object itself is the problem.

What the Science Says

Research on parental responses to sibling conflict does not support one simple rule that parents should always intervene or always stay out. Effects vary with children's ages, the kind of intervention, and the quality of the sibling interaction. Studies of parent mediation also show that structured adult involvement can help children learn more constructive negotiation.

The book therefore makes a narrower claim than 'parents cause fighting.' In a particular household, adult attention, separation, mediation, or rulings may become part of what follows escalation. Observation is how the family finds out: look for repeated sequences and see whether changing the adult response changes the pattern while safety remains intact.

What arriving in the room actually delivers

Attention is a broad word, so it helps to separate what children may actually receive when a parent comes across the hall.

The first is you, undivided. Between four o'clock and bedtime, several consecutive minutes of one adult's full attention can be hard to come by. Homework does not necessarily produce it. A question about the weekend may get answered while someone is draining pasta or looking for a missing shoe.

The second is a hearing. Each child gets to give an account and be listened to through to the end of it, and gets to watch an adult consider it.

The third is a ruling, which settles the matter and is binding on the other child. Siblings themselves usually cannot create that kind of binding decision; the adult at the stove can.

Consider what Kofi's house looks like through that lens.

Kofi is eleven and Wren is seven. She had spent most of that week reciting the same few pages of a book she likes to anyone who

would sit still for it, including the mail carrier, and she is very good at it. Before the September evening with the piece off the model and the rabbit, which you already know about, there were four other times he told his parents that she had been in his room. Those four reports matter here.

The first time, in the spring, his mother said she would talk to Wren, and did, and Kofi saw no visible change. The second report got lost in a Wednesday with a dentist appointment. The third time, Wren was asked to apologize and did so quickly, and everyone moved on. The fourth time, his father told him that he is eleven and should not leave things where a seven-year-old can reach them.

Four reports. Between them they produced one conversation Kofi did not witness, one nothing, one apology delivered in about a second, and one piece of advice about his own conduct.

Now compare those reports with the occasions when Wren entered the room and Kofi reacted strongly. In the family's recollection, a large response from him was one of the most noticeable outcomes that sometimes followed her entering. That makes his reaction a plausible part of the pattern worth testing, not proof of what Wren intended or 'wanted' each time she crossed the doorway.

The two behaviors have had very different histories. Kofi's reports rarely produced a visible change he could see, while handling the problem himself often changed the situation immediately. His increasing privacy may reflect that learning history, along with age, temperament, and other factors. The record gives his parents something concrete to investigate instead of deciding what his character has become.

What each child may be getting from the pattern

Before the practical part, treat function as a working hypothesis rather than a verdict about motive. Ask what reliably changes for each child after the conflict, and then see whether a more direct route to that outcome changes the behavior.

For Ansel, one plausible hypothesis is access to Penny's attention. He puts his hands on her homework, she turns toward him, and a parent often becomes involved soon afterward. That sequence does not prove he planned it. It tells the family what outcome might be worth making available in a safer, more direct way.

For Kofi, a different hypothesis fits the record: the visible retaliation reliably ends the intrusion into his room, while reporting has rarely done so. His parents can test that hypothesis by giving him a fast, dependable way to protect the boundary without retaliating.

For one week, try writing down two things after each incident: who was in the room or within earshot when it started, and what you did in the minute after it ended.

For this first record, leave who started it out of the primary data. In many incidents you will not be able to establish it confidently in the moment, and trying can turn the record into another hearing. Record clear safety events separately.

As much as possible, keep everything else the same while you collect the first week. If you would normally go in, go in. The goal is simply to get a usable baseline before the family starts changing the response.

Many families find that incidents cluster in particular windows or around particular adult responses. Others do not. The purpose of the week is not to confirm the book; it is to discover what is actually true in your house.

Why 'let them work it out' may need a bridge

Letting children resolve some disagreements themselves can be valuable, and research on parent mediation suggests that children can learn more constructive negotiation when adults teach and scaffold those skills rather than simply deciding outcomes for them.

The difficulty comes when two children have relied on an adult ruling for years and are suddenly left with no alternative way to end the dispute. Some pairs will manage. Others will escalate, stall, or become physical. The practical chapters therefore build a replacement route before asking the adult to step back.

Chapter 4 covers what to watch for if the pattern becomes temporarily louder or changes shape after you alter the response. Worsening is possible, not inevitable, and it is never a reason to ignore safety or continue a plan that is clearly not fitting the family.

Everything in this chapter assumes broadly two-directional conflict over time. If the same child is consistently harmed, recurring injury is present, the pattern travels beyond the home, or one child is organizing their life around avoiding the other, read Chapter 9 before changing adult involvement.

How age gap can change what you notice

Age gap can change the practical shape of sibling conflict, but it does not determine function. Use the examples below as patterns to compare with your notes, not categories your children are expected to fit.

With children closer in age, you may see more disputes over shared territory, turns, status, or who was there first, and you may see both children recruit the adult at different times. Tobin and Callie's four incidents in half an hour are an example, not a norm to measure your family against.

What matters in the notes is whether the roles genuinely alternate. If one child is consistently the one seeking help, consistently the one being harmed, or consistently the one losing access to a space or object, do not explain that away because the children are close in age.

A week of notes can also correct the impression created by volume. Tobin is older and louder when angry, so he looks responsible in many individual moments. Across their record, the roles were less one-sided than they seemed from the doorway.

High frequency can make every incident feel as if it requires a large intervention. Often the more useful first move is smaller: understand the repeated sequence before increasing the size of the consequence.

With a wider age gap, conflict may look more asymmetric because the children have different abilities, interests, and power. Penny and Ansel often show one child seeking proximity and the other trying to end it. Other wide-gap pairs will look different.

Penny is twelve and Ansel is six. When his mother writes down who was in earshot, the answer is almost always that she was in the front room and could hear the kitchen. When she writes down what she did in the minute after, the answer is almost always that she came in, found a crying six-year-old and a twelve-year-old turning a page, and sat with Ansel.

A six-year-old touching a worksheet and a twelve-year-old making a cutting remark are not equivalent acts. The useful common question is only what each act changes in that household and whether there is a safer, more direct way to get the needed outcome.

In Penny's case, the sharp sentence may be maintained partly by how effectively it makes Ansel leave. That is a hypothesis about

this family, not a rule about older siblings. Chapter 3 builds alternatives for both sides of that interaction.

Troubleshooting

If you cannot tell who was in earshot, write down where you were rather than trying to reconstruct where everyone else was. Mark the adult as absent only when you were clearly out of range—outside, behind a closed door, or away from the house.

If keeping notes makes you intervene more, move the writing to after dinner rather than doing it in the moment. You may lose some detail, but a usable count from memory is often better than a perfect record that changes how you behave during every incident.

If the week felt atypical, record it anyway. There is no perfectly typical week to wait for. Note anything genuinely unusual on that day's line and keep going.

If they fought when nobody was home, include that row. Then finish the week and look at the pattern rather than treating one Saturday as the shape of every Tuesday.

If your partner does not want to keep the record, use the evenings you cover and label the sheet accordingly. A partial record that actually gets completed can still show useful patterns.

If someone else has the children for part of the week, record those days too. Ask that caregiver for the count rather than a full reconstruction. A grandmother who does two pickups is running a different set of afternoons, and a different number there may become useful information later.

A week in, you may already want to change something. If you can, finish the baseline first so you have a cleaner comparison once the household starts trying a different response.

What the first week revealed

The Saturday after the yard sale, Tobin and Callie's mother stayed home. She had been thinking about the empty house all week. Around eleven, the two of them had an argument in the yard about a bike, and about twenty minutes later they had another one, and she came in from the yard and told her husband that the whole idea was nonsense, because there it was twice, outdoors, with her sitting on the step. He asked whether she had gone over both times. She said of course she had.

In Kofi's house, the evening after the rabbit, his father took the tablet away for the week and told him that whatever Wren had done, holding something over her head while she screamed was not acceptable. From what his father could see, that was a reasonable response. What he did not have, and what nobody in that house had, was a clear account of the four earlier times Kofi had tried to report the problem, because Kofi had stopped expecting those reports to change anything useful.

Penny's mother moved her homework upstairs. It was the sensible response to the same incident happening most evenings in the same room, and she made the decision on a Thursday in a reasonable frame of mind. Penny now does her homework in a bedroom that is genuinely cold, on a radiator that has needed bleeding since last winter. Ansel goes upstairs.

Main Takeaways

Sibling conflict is behavior, and repeated outcomes can shape how likely particular forms of conflict are to recur. That principle is useful without pretending it explains every disagreement.

In many households, an adult response is one important part of what follows a fight. In yours, the record may show attention, a hearing, a ruling, separation, access, escape, or something else.

The parent is not the cause. The parent's response is one variable that may be changeable, which is a different and more useful claim.

When reports repeatedly lead nowhere, children may report less. That possibility is worth considering alongside age, temperament, privacy, and the child's broader relationship with the parent.

This week, record who was within earshot and what you did in the minute after each incident; leave the question of who started it out of the primary record.

Chapter Two
What Stepping In Actually Teaches Them

It is Saturday morning and Tobin and Callie's father has a call he could not move.

Mara is staying, which she does most weekends, so there are three children in the front room and one adult in the kitchen with a laptop open and headphones in. This is not an unreasonable arrangement. It is eleven in the morning, nobody is hungry, and the three of them have been fine together since breakfast.

Callie appears in the doorway of the kitchen and stands there.

She does not interrupt. She has never been a child who interrupts a call, and her parents have said so to other people with some pride. She stands in the doorway and waits, and her father sees her, and holds up one finger, and she waits some more. Then he covers the microphone and says what.

She tells him Tobin says she is not allowed to play.

He says go back in, I will be there in a minute. She goes back in.

She is at the doorway again before the call is over. This time it is that Tobin and Mara have changed the rules and will not tell her what they are. He does the finger again. She waits. He covers the microphone and says he will sort it out when he is off the phone, and she goes back in, and he gets about ninety seconds of the call back before he hears the pitch change in the front room and has to mute himself entirely.

What is happening in the front room while she is standing in the doorway is the part he never sees.

Tobin and Mara are playing a game the two of them invented last weekend, which has rules that get added to. Callie was in it. Then a rule was added that she was not in the game unless she had the yellow one, and she does not have the yellow one, and there is only one yellow one. That is the thing she came to the doorway about, and it is not a thing she can say in a sentence that would mean anything to a man on a call, so what she said was that Tobin says she is not allowed to play.

While she is in the doorway waiting for her father to hold up a finger, the game continues. It does not pause for her. When she goes back in, the two of them are further along in it than they were, and there is now a second rule she was not there for.

So the trip to the doorway costs her the thing she went to the doorway about. She makes it anyway, twice, which tells you something about what the trip is worth.

If you asked him how many times this happens on a Saturday morning he could not tell you. What he could tell you is that he has started noticing the gap between them, and that the gap is short, and that he has begun scheduling calls for after lunch, which is not something he has admitted to anyone.

Now hold that against what happened at the chair on Tuesday, which you have already seen. Callie stood up to get past Tobin, Tobin took the chair, their mother arrived with no view of any of it, and she ruled that getting up means giving it up. That ruling was defensible. It was also, from where Callie was standing, a loss produced by an adult who had not been in the room.

Two children, one house, one week. On Tuesday the adult arrived and ruled and Callie lost. On Saturday she went and got the adult herself, twice, before the adult had finished a sentence.

The two scenes point to the same possibility: adult involvement may have become part of what makes these conflicts worth escalating.

Why 'who started it?' is often the wrong in-the-moment question

It is often the first question a parent asks. It feels responsible because if you can establish what happened, you can respond proportionately, and responding proportionately is what fair people try to do.

Tobin says Callie got up, which is true. Callie says she was there first and stood only to get past him, which is also true. Neither account includes everything that mattered. Tobin does not think of the way he said the sentence as an event, and Callie cannot reproduce the tone in a way that sounds significant once the words are repeated flatly to an adult.

So you have two accounts, both accurate as far as they go, that do not overlap at the point where the thing actually happened. And you have to decide something, because dinner is on and one of them has to sit somewhere.

Be careful not to turn incomplete or self-serving accounts into a conclusion that children are simply lying. Memory is partial, perspective differs, and children also learn which kinds of explanations tend to get heard. Treat an account as information, not as a complete transcript of the event.

Over time, the ways children describe disputes can also be shaped by what has happened after previous reports. A version that reliably produces help or a favorable ruling may be more likely to be used again. That does not require scheming; it is ordinary learning layered on top of ordinary differences in memory and perspective.

So the accounts are evidence, but they are imperfect evidence. They can tell you what each child noticed, feared, wanted, or believed happened. They usually cannot, on their own, reconstruct every link in a fast-moving sibling conflict.

The start point may be genuinely fuzzy as well: a tone, a look, a repeated word, an old grievance carried in from ten minutes earlier. By the time there is a clean event an eight-year-old can name, both children may already be participating.

In the moment, the question often needs to shift from who started it to what has to happen now for everyone to be safe and for the interaction to stop without creating a long courtroom scene.

What a ruling is worth, and who else can issue one

They are getting you, undivided, for several consecutive minutes, with the other child unable to pull you away because the other child is part of the subject. On a Saturday morning where the adult in the house is on a call, that is the single scarcest thing on the premises.

They are getting a hearing. Each one gets to speak and be listened to through to the end.

They are also getting a binding ruling, and that outcome has no sibling substitute. Tobin cannot issue a decision that Callie must accept, Mara cannot settle it for them, and Callie cannot rule for herself. The binding decision comes from the adult at the stove.

Kofi's house shows a different version of the same problem: what happens when careful parents try to be scrupulously fair with evidence they do not actually have.

Kofi is eleven and Wren is seven. When something happens between them, their parents do what careful people do: they ask what happened, they get two accounts, and because the accounts do not agree and nobody was in the room, they land in the middle. In

practice, landing in the middle means both children lose the tablet for the evening.

Here is what that looks like on the Wednesday it happened most recently.

Wren had been in his room. Kofi came out onto the landing with something of hers in his hand and she came up the stairs after him and he shoved her, not hard, and she sat down on the top step and howled. Their mother came up. She asked what happened. Wren said Kofi pushed her, which is true. Kofi said Wren had been in his room, which is also true, and which their mother had no way to check and no reason to disbelieve and no idea what to do with, since the thing in front of her was a seven-year-old on the stairs.

She said that neither of them was having the tablet that evening. Wren cried for a while and was fine by dinner. Kofi said nothing at all and went into his room and shut the door, and their mother recorded the evening in her own head as one where she had been fair to both of them.

The response is even-handed in form, but not necessarily in what it costs each child or what each behavior has already produced.

Wren's contribution was going into her brother's room. The cost of that, this evening, is one tablet. Kofi's contribution was shoving her. The cost of that, this evening, is one tablet.

But the two behaviors have not been followed by the same pattern of outcomes. Wren's entering has sometimes produced a very large reaction from her brother, while Kofi's visible retaliation has reliably drawn an adult response and consequence. The family cannot infer motive from that contrast alone, but it can see that the two behaviors are living in different contingencies.

Split evenly, the evening leaves what follows the entering essentially unchanged. Their parents are not being unfair. They are

being fair in a way that requires knowing who did what, and they do not know who did what, for all the reasons in the last section.

What the Science Says

What follows a behavior can influence what happens next, but an outcome is not automatically reinforcing simply because it occurred afterward. The useful question is whether the overall sequence makes that behavior more likely over repeated occasions.

An unpleasant consequence such as losing a tablet can coexist with other outcomes: focused adult attention, a hearing, a binding decision, escape from the sibling, or an end to the dispute. Which parts matter, if any, has to be inferred from the repeated pattern rather than from whether the parent intended the evening to feel like a loss.

Nothing here implies that a child wants the consequence. It asks you to notice the whole package that follows the behavior and to test which parts of that package appear to matter.

What going in is worth to you

Everything so far has focused on what the children may get from adult involvement. That would be incomplete without looking at what stepping in does for the parent too.

Stepping in often helps the adult immediately: the noise drops, the uncertainty ends, and the evening can move again.

When Tobin and Callie's father comes off mute and settles the argument, the noise usually stops quickly. That immediate relief is one reason stepping in is hard to change, even for a parent who understands the longer-term pattern.

For a parent with a call he cannot move and escalating noise in the next room, walking in may end the problem in under a minute. Few other options in that moment have that kind of immediate payoff.

Understanding the pattern therefore does not automatically change it. Stepping in often brings immediate relief to the adult as well as to the children, so the old response can remain compelling even after the parent understands its longer-term cost.

That pull can be strongest in the conditions where you have the least bandwidth. On a Tuesday when work has been bad and dinner is late, ending the noise quickly may matter more than it does on a calm Saturday. That is another reason to design a plan around real family capacity rather than around what a parent ought to be able to tolerate in theory.

You can see the shape of it in what a household quietly rearranges. Tobin and Callie's father now schedules calls for after lunch on Saturdays, which he has not mentioned to anyone and would describe, if asked, as a preference. Their mother does as much of Sunday's cooking as she can on Sunday morning, when both children are still in their rooms, because doing it at five is not worth what it costs. Neither of those is a decision anyone made about the fighting. They are what a week looks like after a couple of years of the half hour before dinner, and they are the reason it is not accurate to describe the fighting as a problem that belongs to the children.

There is an adult in the pattern as well as two children. What the parent experiences, and what intervention changes for the parent, belongs in the same picture.

None of this means going in was wrong. When children are shouting or one of them has been shoved, stepping in may be the responsible thing to do, as it was on many of these evenings. The harder point is that stepping back costs the parent something real and immediate: the noise continues, the uncertainty remains, and

dinner still has to happen. Advice that ignores that cost is unlikely to fit the person who has to carry it out.

What each child may be trying to change

Before adding to the record, it helps to separate two possibilities in the examples.

For Callie, the doorway may function partly as a route to her father's attention and help. For another younger sibling, the important outcome could be access to the object, protection from teasing, or something else entirely. The record, not the age gap, should decide which hypothesis you test.

For Kofi, the strongest hypothesis is different: he wants the intrusion to end. Retaliation has often done that faster than reporting. Chapter 3 therefore gives him a route that changes the room situation without requiring him to win a hearing.

Add two columns to what you were already recording.

First, whether you issued a ruling. Not whether you went in, which you were already tracking, but whether you decided something: who gets the chair, whose turn it was, who has to apologize. A yes or a no.

Second, how long you were in the room. You do not need a stopwatch, and rounding to the nearest minute is fine. What you are after is whether the hearings are two minutes or nine.

Then, at the end of the week, add up the minutes. Not the incidents, which you already have from last week, and not the rulings. The minutes: the total time you spent standing in a room settling something between your two children. The total is often more revealing than any single incident because it is difficult to believe that something is a major feature of your household when each instance of it takes four minutes.

When you hear an argument starting and do not go in immediately, notice your own pull to act: what you listen for, what you stop doing, and what you fear will happen next. You are not being asked to endure a fixed number of difficult weeks. You are learning what the old response was doing for you before you try to change it.

Fair hearings can still become part of the pattern

Hearing both sides, avoiding automatic blame, and treating children with respect are sound principles. The question is whether every low-level dispute needs a full hearing in the moment.

For some families, careful mediation is useful and can teach negotiation. For others, repeated ad hoc hearings become the main route by which a minor dispute earns several minutes of adult attention and a binding decision. Those are different situations and they should not be treated as one universal rule.

The practical distinction is between mediation you deliberately choose because it teaches something and reflexive refereeing you are recruited into because the argument has become loud enough. Chapter 3 is aimed at reducing the second without eliminating the first.

That also means children learn from how adults handle disagreement. Calm mediation, repair, and respectful limits can model skills; repeated courtroom-style rulings can model a different route. The book is not asking parents to disappear from conflict, only to become more deliberate about the role they play.

How age gap can change the reporting pattern

With closer-in-age pairs, both children may recruit the adult at different times. If your notes show that pattern, a shared replacement may be practical. If they show one child doing nearly

all the reporting or nearly all the harm, treat that as information rather than forcing the pair into a close-age template.

Accounts may be hard to reconcile even when both children are sincere. A quiet, polite report can still function as a bid for adult involvement, just as a loud one can. The form of the report tells you less than the repeated outcome that follows it.

The volume can make each individual instance feel too small to matter: four minutes seems like nothing, but four minutes repeated several times an evening becomes a substantial part of family life. The total is more informative than any single incident.

With wider age gaps, the reports may run more in one direction, especially when the younger child seeks help or contact from an adult. That is common enough to watch for, not common enough to assume.

Penny is twelve and Ansel is six. He has been out on the sidewalk with the bike most afternoons since March, working on the same thing until it is too dark to see. Then, on a Wednesday with their father away, he comes to his mother with something about Penny roughly a dozen times in an evening: she said something, she looked at me, she shut the door. Their mother has developed a way of sorting which reports need action and which do not, and each conversation still gives Ansel a few minutes alone with the only adult in the house.

Ansel's reports often produce several minutes with the only adult in the house. That makes adult attention a plausible maintaining outcome in this family. The reports can also be true; function and accuracy are separate questions.

The difficulty in this family is that many of Ansel's reports are true. Penny does say things. She said the thing about his friends, and she has said other cutting things as well. A parent who simply stops

responding to accurate reports from a six-year-old would not be solving the right problem. Chapter 3 therefore tries to give both children something more workable to do than report or retaliate, while keeping the parent available when the content of a report genuinely matters.

Penny's sharp response may not need the parent at all if it makes Ansel leave. In the same interaction, the two children can therefore be responding to different outcomes from different people.

Troubleshooting

You stopped asking who started it and now you cannot decide what to do with the disputed thing. For this observation week, separate the children and use a neutral reset when you genuinely cannot establish what happened. With shared, nonessential items, that may mean putting the item away briefly. Do not use this rule for personal possessions, school materials, food, medical or assistive items, or anything one child clearly owns.

One child may keep asking you to decide. A brief response such as 'I'm not deciding this one' is usually enough; a long explanation can recreate the hearing you were trying to shorten. If the child keeps following you, return to what you were doing while staying available for safety.

If you have been asking who started it for years, setting the question aside in the moment can feel like giving up on justice. The fuller question can still be asked later, separately, when nothing is happening and the goal is to understand a pattern rather than issue an immediate ruling. What changes here is the hallway courtroom at half past five, not the parent's interest in knowing what happened.

The reports are true. Keep them. Write them down rather than automatically turning each one into an immediate ruling, and tell the child you are recording it because it matters. If a report concerns safety, threats, coercion, injury, or repeated boundary violations, act on the safety issue rather than filing it for later.

Your notes show you never rule, you just separate them. Then look at the minutes instead. Separating two children and staying in the room for six minutes to make sure it holds is a hearing without a verdict, and it delivers three of the four things a ruling delivers.

If your partner is still ruling while you are trying not to, avoid correcting them in front of the children. Record the two sets of evenings separately so you can see whether the pattern actually differs, then bring that information into a calm conversation later. Two adults do not have to share the same theory, but the household will have an easier time if they can agree on a response both can realistically carry out.

It is common to notice more incidents once you start tracking them. Note the change and keep the first weeks in context rather than assuming the increase means the fighting itself suddenly worsened.

What happened next

Penny's mother stopped responding to the reports on a Monday. It went better than she expected for three days: Ansel came, she said she was not going to sort it out, and he went away, and the evenings were quieter than they had been in a year. On Thursday he came into the front room and told her Penny had said something, and she said the thing she had been saying all week without looking up, and he went away. She found out on Saturday what Penny had said. It was the sort of thing she would have wanted to know about on Thursday.

Kofi lost the tablet along with his sister on a Wednesday, for something that had started in his own room. On the way upstairs he said, to nobody in particular but audibly, that it does not matter what he does. His mother heard it. She thought about it for two days and then asked him what he had meant, in the car, which is where that family has its conversations. He said he did not know what she was talking about. She has not asked again.

Tobin and Callie's father did not go in on the second Saturday. Callie came to the doorway twice, and both times he said he was not going to sort it out, and both times she went back in, and the noise from the front room got louder rather than stopping. So he took the laptop out to the yard and finished the call from the step, with the back door shut behind him, and the noise carried on until the call ended and then stopped on its own about a minute later. He has not told his wife that this is what he did. He did it again the following Saturday.

Main Takeaways

Who started it is often difficult to establish reliably in the moment, especially when the sequence began with tone, teasing, or earlier events the adult did not witness.

Walking in can deliver several valuable outcomes at once: focused attention, a hearing, and sometimes a binding ruling that only the adult can provide.

An even-handed consequence can still land unevenly when the children's contributions, needs, ownership, or earlier experiences were different.

Going into the room can be reinforced for the parent too when it reliably ends an aversive interaction quickly. That immediate relief helps explain why insight alone may not change the response.

Reports can contain important information, but they are not a complete record of the fight. They can also be one route by which an adult becomes involved, so track both what is reported and what repeatedly follows the report.

This week, record two more things: whether you issued a ruling, and how many minutes you spent in the room. At the end of the week, add up the minutes.

END OF SAMPLE

You have seen the pattern.

The rest of the book shows you what to do about it.

STILL AHEAD

Chapter 3: Leaving Them to It Isn't Doing Nothing
Chapter 4: Why They Escalate Until Someone Comes
Chapter 5: Why It's Always the Same Time of Day
Chapter 6: When the One Who Hits Back Gets Punished
Chapter 7: Why Fair Doesn't Settle Anything
Chapter 8: Why It Comes Back in the Summer
Chapter 9: Why Some of It Is Not a Fight

Keep reading in

Who Started It

Why Your Kids Fight, and What Actually Works
by Emery Sol, BCBA, LMFT

Available in paperback on Amazon

MORE FROM EMERY SOL

Nothing Sticks
consequences that actually teach

Defiant at Home
defiance and power struggles

Zero to Sixty
meltdowns in older kids

My Stomach Hurts
anxiety and school refusal