

Self-Regulating when One Child Hurts the Other

“The only thing that really makes me *lose it* is when my four-year-old repeatedly is physically violent to his two-year-old sister. I try to do what you say, and say, ‘Quick, Sammy, can you get her an ice pack?’ and turn him into a helper. He’s good at it. But it makes me mad if they’re fighting and I say ‘I’m coming to help’ and then he throws her to the ground and busts her head.”—Wendy, mother of four year old and two year old.

Infuriating, right? Most parents say that when one child hurts another, it’s the hardest time for them to self-regulate. In this case, it’s even worse, because Mom tried so hard to intervene, and her son still hurt his sister. Even though he knew Mom was coming, he couldn’t trust that she’d be there soon enough, and he couldn’t control his impulses. He is, after all, only four. It’s hard for a four-year-old to resist power, especially when he’s sure he’s right and his sister is wrong. (Part of being four is being sure you’re right. He’s not likely to see his sister’s side of things yet.)

Of course, the two-year-old deserves protection, so you’ll need to do clear limit setting. And I think you’ll find my book *Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings* very helpful in doing the prevention work that avoids your child acting this way toward a sibling.¹⁾

But the question this mom is asking is, how do you self-regulate when your child is hurt?

The answer is, you don’t. When your child is hurt, you become a raging lunatic and you will do anything to protect them and destroy anyone who threatens them.

But, of course, that’s not a practical answer when the perp is also your child. It’s not even a practical answer when the perp is the next-door neighbor’s kid and you want to smash him to bits, but he’s a child too. And that is actually the clue to how to handle this in the moment, when you’re so dysregulated you can’t see straight. If the neighbor’s child threw your daughter to the ground so she hit her head, you wouldn’t waste time screaming at him. You would fly to your child and help her. You would ignore the aggressor. Once you were calm, you would figure out how to protect your child from another incident.

Of course, this highlights our problem. With siblings, it's pretty hard to protect your child from another incident. You can't build a fence to keep your own child out of your yard. This increases your frustration that you can't keep such incidents from happening, when you've tried so hard. So the truth is, the reason you "lose it" is that you feel powerless and the rage makes you feel better. I hasten to add that you aren't wrong. Any parent would feel this way. But what are your choices? You could spank your child, but research shows that would make him more aggressive, which is just what you're trying to stopⁱⁱ. You could shame and punish him, but research (and common sense) tells us that would increase the sibling rivalry and worsen the relationship.ⁱⁱⁱ The *only* thing that will stop such incidents from happening is prevention, which includes helping your son with his jealousy and with his panic when you're on the way to help but he isn't sure you'll get there in time.

So we're back to that moment when you're furious that this scenario keeps happening and you simply *have* to express your authentic upset to your child. But what's really authentic here? It isn't your rage at your son. That's a defense against something even more primal—your anguish that you haven't been able to protect one of your children, which is your most foundational responsibility as a parent. You *need* to keep your children safe. Your need is driving your rage.

So get in touch with that need and express it. For your child to *want* to help, he has to hear your words as an expression of your need, rather than an attack on him: "*I need all of my children to be safe. I get so upset and angry when one of my children is hurt. I get even more upset and angry when one of my children hurts the other!*"

Notice that you're clearly expressing anger. Your child has no doubt that you're angry. But, even though your voice was passionate, you didn't blame your child. If you tell him you're furious at him for hurting his sister, he's confirmed in his fear that you don't love him—because of her! He'll be on the defensive and won't be able to change. If instead you can convey your fierce need to keep all your children from hurting each other—which is in fact what this is about—your child will be much more likely to respond by wanting to meet your need.

Does this sound too simple? He'll obviously need to feel connected to you to *want* to work with you on this, so prioritizing Connection is essential. And he'll need to feel understood, so you'll need to work on your emotion coaching. Finally, he may well need to cry, to work through all of those painful feelings that are driving him to hurt his sister. And, if he only seems to hurt her when she touches his things, you may need to come up with a temporary solution to keep her away from them. You wouldn't expect a four-year-old to cross the street by himself, because he doesn't yet have the impulse control to keep himself safe. Similarly, he doesn't yet have the impulse control to manage himself when a competitor destroys something he has worked really hard to create (which is how he experiences it when his sister wrecks his castle).

Excerpted from the [Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids WORKBOOK](#) by Dr. Laura Markham

ⁱ Markham, L. (2015). *Peaceful parent, happy siblings: How to stop the fighting and raise friends for life*. New York, NY: Penguin.

ⁱⁱ Gershoff, E.T. (2002) Corporal punishment by parents and associated child behaviors and experiences: a meta-analytic and theoretical review. *Psychol Bull. Jul; 128(4):539-79*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brody, G. H. (1998) *Sibling Relationship Quality: It's Causes and Consequences*. Annual Review Psychology 49: 1-24.