

You may remember going through it when you were a child. Some are still caught in the midst of it, even though they are now adults.

It is sibling rivalry and sometimes, nobody knows when the fighting will be over.

However, it is not necessarily negative, and can be a platform to deal with issues relating to family life and love.

In fact, it is pretty much "a growing up process for children," according to Miss Caroline Kee, senior psychologist specialising in under 19-year-olds at the Institute of Mental Health.

But, when the fighting becomes violent and persistent, it is time for the parent to take notice of the issues.

Most siblings fight to gain their parents' attention and affection. Other times, it stems from personality clashes, arguments and differences of opinion, said Rahul, a parent.

Sibling rivalries can spark feelings of insecurity and resentment that can be carried into adulthood.

It is possible for these issues to resurface then and affect sibling relationships and self-esteem, revealed Mrs Tan Yee Pin, deputy head of Medical Social Work at the Institute of Mental Health.

Siblings squabble about things like who gets to watch what television programmes, who gets to play with the toys, or who will be the first to take a shower and use the bathroom.

Physical fights are very common among male siblings and mothers like Shanti often have to play referee when her sons wrestle, box or karate kick each other.

Some kids snitch on each other to draw attention to themselves and parents will sooner or later discover it. Rahul, a father of two, says when one of his children does something wrong, the other is sure to tell on him, because "there is no way a child can keep a secret about his siblings".

Then there are the appeals for justice, when one child perceives parents as giving unfair treatment to other children in the family.

Shanti, who has two sons, said that her younger son, 5, would say, 'You are not fair,' when she punished them both for being naughty.

This is very common in cases of sibling rivalry, Miss Kee and Mrs Tan said.

They said that siblings are actually competing

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for their parents' attention when they compete among themselves.

The competition is, ironically, sometimes fueled by parents when they compare the performance of each child.

The motive may be encouragement but it can backfire and

result in resentment and a hunger for approval from the child who fares poorly by the comparison.

It may even cause anger and hostility towards the other sibling, revealed Miss Kee.

"Parents should cut down on comparisons between children. In addition, they should help children to develop their own areas of competence, be it in sports, art or academics"

Miss Kee also advised that it helps if parents value the different strengths of each child.

For example, if a parent only values academic performance, the child who is not academically inclined will feel slighted. Each child needs to be appreciated for his or her own

strengths and talents.

Mrs Tan feels that parents should find out the cause of arguments before jumping to conclusions.

Unfair reprimand of a child for something he has not done builds resentment and may cause more dissonance between siblings.

Both specialists agree that parents should build a relationship with each child.

Ten minutes of talking to a child about his day, school and friends will make him feel special and eliminate the feeling of being 'overlooked'.

It also does wonders for the parent-child relationship. Sibling rivalry is normal.

Sometimes it is because the first child feels another one has invaded his space. Shanti puts it so aptly, referring to her older son: "Every day was his own day until the younger one came".

It is also easy to understand why a younger child is always trying to rise above the shadow of older one.

The older child, meanwhile, will try to regain his previous influence over his parents and their attention.

So, at the heart of it all is a tug-of-war among the children to secure their parents' attention and affection.

It may not stop at childhood, during their teen years, or even far into their "mature" years.

Next week, we will feature sibling rivalry during the teenage years.

