

HELP FILE

Sibling Rivalry, swearing 4 year old

"Can you tell me please how to get a 4 year old to stop swearing, to listen and to do as he is told and a 6 year old to stop talking so much and to stop hitting her brother?

Thanks, G"

Jenny Replied

Parenting is the toughest job, but also the most rewarding and I can sense your frustration. So let's look at what's happening.

A 4 year old swearing is probably modelling / copying someone else's behaviour. It also feels good because adults notice him when he swears. This reinforces the misbehaviour. You need not to make a fuss, - the less fuss the better when he swears. The best thing at this age is to firstly give him another word to use, - maybe just as expletive but not so offensive. He doesn't really understand what he's saying, just that it gets a reaction.

You can also weaken and even abolish his need to swear by giving him the reaction he seeks for other types of behaviour, - 'catch him doing things right' and notice and praise that behaviour, - (can be anything he's doing e.g helping you etc.). You'll see a change in behaviour and he will also listen better when you do this.

There is probably a great deal of sibling rivalry in this situation. The rivalry stems from an innate awareness that the amount of love in a family, (however much there is), is always limited to just that particular quantity, - and sharing it with another simply halves it, - which is a relative deprivation. Its very important to understand this dynamic and not feel that you are not loving your children enough!

I must make a detour here about anger, and then come back to that feeling of deprivation I just mentioned. Humans are equipped with the ability to become angry and have a corresponding intense dislike of having anger expressed to ones self. So when we are the target of an angry response to something we've said or done, the anger expressed back to us will hurt, and to avoid that hurt in the future we will have to avoid repeating what we did or said in the first place. Conversely, when we are angered by something said or done to us our automatic response is to express the anger we feel at the person who caused it, - to prevent it happening again. (For example, worried anxious panicky mum when child is late home after dark. When child arrives home mum immediately converts to anger, - "Don't your dare ever ever do that again", etc.)

Ok so back to your 4 year old feeling deprived, - he gets angry and thus the swearing. He's probably trying to be noticed because he feels his sister has all the attention. His sister may feel he has all the attention....and so she gets angry and

thus the hitting. Hitting is not permitted, - so teach her to use words to replace actions, e.g. to actually say, "I am very hurt when you do that and I want you to stop". Make it a rule in the home until this behaviour changes. Also make sure that if hitting is a tendency in the home, - abolish it immediately in the whole family. Have a family discussion if needed.

Remember to catch her when she's doing it right too! Don't forget it's pretty natural for him to be jealous of her and she of him, his arrival at least halved the amount of attention she used to get. But it's important that whatever she feels - you need to acknowledge it, its real and natural, so say things like, "I can see you don't like your brother at the moment but **tell** him how you're feeling and that you're angry ... don't hit. Acknowledge their feelings but limit their behaviour.

If she seems to talk too much ... stop and listen to her ... when she feels you are focused in on her and really listening and responding to what she is saying maybe she won't talk so much, and maybe she won't need then to take her feelings out on her brother which also links to the sibling rivalry.

I highly recommend a wonderful book to assist you in helping them build better relationships as siblings and to lower your stress as a parent. It is called "Siblings without Rivalry" by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. They have also written, "How to Talk so Kids will Listen and how to Listen so Kids will Talk", also excellent.

Enjoy your children.

Jenny Mackay