



Fight Night

Squabbling siblings have their place in family life

By Kelli Wheeler

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the main event! In this corner, standing at 4 feet even, 56 pounds, age 5 1/2 years, is Logan “The Bugger” Wheeler.

In the far corner, standing 3 feet 8 inches, 48 pounds, age 4 years, is Whitney “The Squealer” Wheeler.

Yes, ladies and gentlemen, this promises to be another patience-straining match-up between the brother-and-sister duo, with heated name calling, power shouting, illegal use of hands, mixed martial arts and threats of a knockout punch until the fight is called by the referee, with both challengers retreating for timeouts until a truce is declared by judge’s decision.

Let’s get ready to rumble!

OK, so we may not be having the Ultimate Fighting Challenge at my house, but some days it sure seems like it. With constant bickering and teasing over who has control of the remote, who gets to pick what story we read for bed, who gets to get in or out of the tub first, who got kissed good night first . . . well, you get the idea. I thought having children 17 months apart would provide lifelong playmates rather than on-site sparring partners.

When you decide to have kids, you envision all sorts of idyllic scenarios for the raising of a perfect family. You imagine your children lovingly calling each other “Brother” and “Sissy,” playing in heart-constricting harmony together on the playground,

and generously sharing their toys and books with each other.

Let’s see, let me review the last week: children calling each other Stinky Weasel Butt and Big Fat Jerk; screaming at eardrum-breaking decibels to “Give me back my swing or I’m gonna punch you in the face” (from the lovely girl child); and no-holds-barred wrestling matches over a fan/light/lollipop/toy. It makes me regret all the time I invested teaching them to walk and talk.

I know sibling rivalry is a normal part of growing up. I clearly remember my own sparring days with my older brother and sometimes freeze in a moment of déjà vu when rushing to intervene with my kids. I’ve even held my impressed applause when I’ve walked in on the tried and true Hair Grab Maneuver performed to perfection by little sister or the Hey, Wouldn’t This Be a Great Trade swindle smoothly executed by big brother.

But being on the other side of the fence now makes me understand the passion and desperation behind my mother’s words. “God bless America! If I hear one more word from either of you you’re going to your rooms!” she’d say. Or “I don’t care who started it, so don’t say another word!” And the all-time winner: “Ron! Kelli! Go to your rooms and don’t come out until I tell you!” I think that might have something to do with why I’m such a good independent player.

The boy/girl genetics thing and their differing forms of play have become apparent and are the root of many skirmishes recently. For

example, Whitney is perfectly happy and capable of finding games to play by herself. The trouble (as in brother) comes along when Logan, who cannot sit still because he thinks he might explode if he does, and seemingly incapable of independent play (mommy group buzz being it’s a first-child thing), insists that his sister needs to play with him. In essence, he bugs his sister until she explodes.

The flip side of this is that Logan as the older, bigger sibling has a tendency to play too rough (two emergency room visits so far) or just for the sheer sport of it tease to tears his sister. Being aware that Logan is pretty regularly submitted to an automatic timeout for hurting his sister inadvertently or otherwise, Whitney has incorporated as part of the English language the whine-and-squeal-until-someone-comes-running method of communication.

Oh, but when they play together so wonderfully, it is a heartbreaking work of staggering preciousness. Like when Logan dresses Whitney up in his clothes so they match and they play Dudes together. (“C’mon, dude. Let’s go climb trees.” “OK, dude!”) Or when they each climb into their motorized Jeeps and zoom around together playing Friend. (“Hi, friend! Want to come to the store with me?” “Sure, friend! But let’s stop at the gas station first.”)

There are also the things they teach each other as only older and younger siblings can. Logan has taught Whitney everything he knows from climbing trees to jumping off swings. She is his little protégé and

he is her wise old teacher. Whitney’s fearlessness and confidence have given Logan the courage to try things his cautious nature would prevent him from trying otherwise, like diving to the bottom of the deep end of the pool or entering a room full of strangers and making new friends.

So, as the judge of this match, I call it a draw. Siblings offer each other a tremendous wealth of life experiences, positive and sometimes not so positive. I know in my own case, my brother and I were there for each other just as much as we tortured each other, and in the end we’re true friends. There is a special love bond, and camaraderie between siblings as only people with an extended shared life experience can have.

I do believe sibling rivalry, when kept in check by a parent, is a helpful part of growing up. It is a vital part of shaping your child’s early experiences with conflict resolution, compromise, consequences of their actions and even self-defense. It also refines parenting skills in patience, mediation and teachable moments. Despite moments of last nerves and sworn enemies for life, it’s an irreplaceable growth experience for all involved. It would just be nice if we could keep the emergency room visits out of it.

I also might need to teach Whitney my old Hot Tamale Arm Rub move to level the playing field.

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