



OH, BROTHER!

Sibling rivalry can be a headache for parents. Here's how to stop your kids from bickering and trying to outdo one another **BY NICI DE WET**

FAMILY time. Words that should elicit warm, fuzzy feelings and bring to mind images of togetherness, fun and laughter. But not for Joanne*, whose four sons range in age from nine to 16. She'd love to have relaxed family time but instead she's at her wits' end thanks to the boys' constant bickering.

"It can be anything from who's going to sit in the front seat of the car to who goes on the PlayStation first," Joanne (46) says. "And if I show preference to one, they take it out on one another. It's like they're constantly trying to exert their power over one another – it's exhausting."

While it can be draining for Joanne, her sons' behaviour is actually quite normal, says Kirsten McLeod, a child counsellor at Foundations for Life in Cape Town. "Sibling rivalry is all about kids working out their place in the family."

Different personalities and ages play a role, but siblings tend to see themselves as rivals competing for an equal share of limited family resources. How it plays out differs from family to family, but it can drive parents crazy. We asked some experts for tips on how to handle it.

RIVALRY TRIGGERS

While conflict between siblings is normal, incessant squabbling needs to be addressed. But before you can do something about it you need to see where it's coming from. These are the most common triggers.

CONTROL

Most households don't have unlimited resources, which means siblings at some stage have to share at least some of their possessions.

"My two daughters, aged nine and six, fight endlessly about sharing the iPad – it's got so bad the one deleted the other's Roblox profile, which led to an even bigger meltdown," says Lauren* (44) from Johannesburg.

DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

Your eldest child might be an introvert while the youngest is outgoing and headstrong or vice versa. Differences in temperament along with age and gender differences can all lead to sibling conflict.

FAIRNESS ISSUES

A younger sibling might complain that

her older sister gets to go to a concert while she has to stay home.

Or an older sister whines about having to babysit her little brother instead of going out with her pals. Feelings of unfair treatment and jealousy can lead to resentment and rivalry.

PARENTAL ATTENTION/APPROVAL

Children are always vying for their parents' attention and when they see a sibling getting more attention than they do, it can make them act out.

This can be made worse when parents compare them with each other, for example by saying things such as, "Why can't you be more like your sister?" or "Stop being so sensitive like your brother."

ACHIEVEMENT ISSUES

"When one child sees a sibling achieving things while they're not achieving to the same level, it can also lead to rivalry," says Dane Channon, a paediatric psychologist based in East London.

"This can be reinforced by the parents, often unknowingly."