



When Two's a Crowd

Shared-Space Strategies

Karen Gibson

Millions of children share spaces with others. Maybe a new baby enters the picture, a grandparent moves in, or a parent remarries someone with children. Children all over the world share a bedroom — and fight about it.

Your bedroom should be your haven where you feel calm and safe. But sharing your haven with somebody else can create tension. Siblings, unlike friends and couples, don't choose to be together. They are thrown together, for better or for worse.

Sibling Rivalry

If you have siblings, you have rivalry. Sibling rivalry can be good training for the real world, because how we relate to our siblings often impacts other relationships. Siblings learn quickly that "life is not fair." This is not a happy lesson, but it is an accurate lesson that provides training in the art of negotiation. Although it's one of the hardest things for parents to do, when parents allow children to work out their differences, it is empowering for the children.

However, the conflict that goes with sharing a bedroom involves more than rivalry. It also has to do with personal boundaries. Boundaries are as important to humans as they are to members of the animal kingdom — like animals that mark their territories. It's no different with humans. We parents don't want people driving cars across our lawns or rifling through our belongings. Children have the same needs. They need the comfort that comes from knowing that defined areas belong to them and that others won't destroy or take something from their spaces.

Strategies for Sharing Space

Here are a few ideas for helping your children share their spaces with smiling faces.

•*Create a place for sharing.* A common area can serve as a play area where certain toys are to be shared. No particular person owns any particular thing.

•*Establish personal space.* An area or corner of the room is great. If space limitations make this impossible, try a shelf, a drawer, a nightstand, or even a box to create personal space.

•*Help the oldest child adjust.* The oldest child is usually the one who has to give up his personal space. Discuss what area will be his and how he can protect his belongings. The older child must keep small toys put up where little ones can't reach them. He also

Tips for Organizing and Decorating Kid Space

- Nothing irritates a "big kid" more than having "baby" decor. Instead of forcing your big kid to share a room decorated with wallpaper of your little kid's favorite cartoon character, let your little kid put a poster of his favorite character over his bed.
- Space is at a premium when your children share a bedroom. Look for ways to incorporate storage into your space, such as beds with drawers under them. Shelves can be a lifesaver. Storage boxes and cubes are great also.
- Bunk beds are great for shared rooms. Today's styles include options such as extra storage and desks. With bunk beds, safety is the primary concern. Make sure both children are old enough and that the beds are safe, because both will climb on the top bunk.
- Furniture can be a great natural divider, but if your children experience a lot of problems in sharing a room, you might want to invest in a screen to use as a room divider.
- Let each child create a private corner to call her own. Lots of big pillows or a beanbag chair can become a great place for thinking and dreaming.

Books for Children

The Pain and the Great One, by Judy Blume (Simon & Schuster, 1984)

It's Mine!, by Leo Lionni (Dragonfly, 1986)

My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother, by Patricia Polacco (Simon & Schuster, 1994)

Messy Bessy's Closet, by Pat McKissack (Children's Press, 1989)

Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, by Judy Blume (Yearling Books, 1976)

must learn to place valuable possessions out of reach, or he will learn a hard lesson.

•*Reinforce the concept of boundaries and asking permission.* Insist that children ask before using things that belong to brothers or sisters. While very young children may not understand the message, it helps the older child feel better. In time, the younger child will understand that they must ask permission and that older siblings must also ask permission.

•*Be fair at bedtime.* While it's easier to have the same bedtime, if your children have a large range between their ages, you will probably have to go with individual bedtimes. The time after a younger child goes to bed can be a good opportunity for a parent and an older child to have individual time. In our household, we have a joint bedtime for the two youngest children. The 4-year-old chooses a book and the 2-year-old chooses a book. We all snuggle together and read both books.

•*Provide time alone.* Try to allow each child some time in his room alone or with a friend. Arrange a play date with a younger child when the older one has a friend coming over. Or let one child have the room to himself while you keep the other occupied in another part of the house.

Being in the same family and sharing the same bedroom creates many opportunities for sharing. While sharing is an admirable trait to teach our children, so is the concept of boundaries. When parents respect boundaries, it sends a strong message to children that they are important as individuals. Different friends, separate activities, and a little one-on-one parenting go a long way in helping a child feel unique and loved. 😊

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Illustration is by Dara Goldman.