

## upcoming events

All events are held in our San Francisco office. Fees for presentations are \$40/person or \$60/couple. For more information visit our website: [www.symbiosf.com](http://www.symbiosf.com).

### Managing Sibling Rivalry

Wednesday 08 April  
7:00 pm

Dealing with sibling rivalry can be one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of family life. In this presentation, we will discuss how to encourage strong, healthy sibling relationships, create clear guidelines and boundaries, model independent problem solving and maintain your own sanity. Topics will include empathy, sharing, communication, guidelines and how-to's for parental intervention, and managing aggressive behaviors.

### Parental Anger & Conflict in The Home

Wednesday 22 April  
7:00 pm

This is topic has come up so often in our individual consultations. Parents regularly struggle with feelings about their kids and the experience of parenting that they would rather not have. The stress of parenting and managing the demands of life and relationship can lead to conflict and expressions of anger or frustration that parents regret and do not know how to address. This seminar will focus on taking an honest look at the harder moments of parenting, exploring the best ways of responding to them and addressing the hidden opportunities they provide for healthy child rearing.

# april @ symbio



## q & a

*We have a 4.5-year-old girl and a boy who will be three in June. In general, they get along very well. She was not a jealous older sibling and actually welcomed him when he arrived. However, in the last few months, our son has increasingly "found his own voice" and this has not helped his relationship with his older sister. Our daughter is a bit of a control freak and, as our son become less compliant with her; she has become more forceful with him. My wife and I don't have a problem holding a boundary around hitting, biting, and clawing with fingernails but lately there have been a number of incidents when we hear one or both of them start crying and arrive to find them both apparently hurt and accusing the other of having been violent. We don't want to let aggression go unpunished, but we also don't want to punish the wrong kid. We are concerned that this would encourage lying and lead them to resent each other. It doesn't seem fair to punish them both if we are not sure both of them did something wrong. What would you advise?*

This situation is a stumper for many parents – and your questions are all good ones. We advise parents to have a zero-tolerance policy around physical aggression, but this is hard to enforce when you are not sure which child is responsible for the aggression. It's easy for parents to get sucked into the trap of trying to wrest enough evidence out of their children to reconstruct the events; but this usually yields a great deal more in the way of

## Dealing with Opposition & Defiance

Wednesday 13 May  
7:00 pm

"I don't want to crush his spirit, but I need him to listen to me." "I feel like she says goes against me just to make me mad." Parents often ask how maintain boundaries and structure with kids who seem intent on undermining every plan that is not their own. In this presentation we will discuss how to protect order and maintain your authority in ways that support your child mentally and emotionally. We'll talk about discipline tactics, how to decide when to be firm and when to let go, and developmentally appropriate expectations and techniques for children of various ages.

## Open Forum on Parenting Toddlers & Preschoolers

Wednesday 27 May  
7:00 – 9:00 pm

This evening will be an open house rather than a presentation. Come and go as best suits your schedule. If you've got questions or quandaries regarding anything related to guiding young minds, nurturing young hearts and preserving your own sanity in the process, drop-in for a while to chat with us, compare notes with other parents or reassure yourself that other people go through this too. Any topic is fair game, whether it's sleep, discipline, separations, potty-training, pre-schools, siblings, or any other item on that ever-expanding menu of character-building exercises designed for you with love by your children.

## sybio

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with young children

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creative thinking and dramatic expression than factual information. The solution may seem simpler if you consider the purpose of discipline to be sending a message and enforcing a boundary about what is and is not acceptable rather than meeding out justice. In this case, the message that you want both of your children to receive is that violence is not acceptable, for any reason. So, if your son took the toy your daughter was playing with, she has a right to be upset and to pursue its return – but she doesn't have a right to hit, bite, etc. in order to get it back. Presumably, your kids are playing together without your supervision because you trust them to be able to do so in a way that upholds the rules of the house, at least a reasonable amount of the time. That's developmentally appropriate at their ages. If either of them gets hurt in an unsupervised interaction, it may not be clear to you what happened, but it's clear that, for the moment, they are not upholding those rules. If you come into the situation and begin examining them, you have missed the opportunity to convey the message to them regarding the responsibility that they have, together, for maintaining safety. Instead we recommend that you keep the conversation short, to the point, and based on what you already know: "You two aren't playing safely right now, and that's not okay, so you are done for the time being." If there has been an argument over a toy, take it away from them both. The concern isn't about who hit who, so much as the fact that together they have escalated over this toy to the point where someone got hurt; so the toy isn't safe at the moment. We also recommend separating children immediately whenever someone gets hurt. This is important for a number of reasons: It reinforces your clear, zero-tolerance stance regarding violence. It gives kids a cooling off period in which to refocus. And finally, most siblings do not like to be separated, no matter who is to blame, so knowing this will be the consequence of your involvement (which is the consequence of violence) adds an extra deterrent. Young kids are true gamblers, if there is a chance that getting mom or dad involved in a situation will improve their chances of a desirable outcome, they will choose to roll the dice from time to time. If you buy into the role of referee, it's very hard to get out of it. So, it's important that when it comes to issues that you must respond to, you do so in a way that keeps you out of that position. You want your kids to understand that if you have to intervene, no one will come up the lucky winner of the hotly contested toy or the right to jurisdiction over a particular part of the room. Instead, they can expect that you will consistently reestablish a safe situation, but otherwise your involvement will amount to a buzz-kill for them both. You want your kids to band together to keep you out of the mix, which means working together to keep things safe. Most of the time even the victim has a good deal of power to avoid violence. On those occasions when one of your kids is truly in the position of a powerless victim, you still do much better for them in the long run by being consistent in your approach than by getting drawn into the "who's at fault" debate. A related concern that you did not mention is the question of moral learning. We hear from many parents who fear that if they pass up the opportunity to sort out right and wrong with kids and react accordingly, they will fail to encourage their kids to choose non-violent means of conflict because it's the right thing to do, rather than to avoid a consequence. We tell these parents that they can rest easy on this point: moral development is built as a child internalizes a negative feedback cycle that starts with external experiences. For example, learning: "Things don't go well for me when I bite my brother." Over time this experience translates to pairing an unpleasant emotional experience with biting. As empathy and cognitive understanding develop, this emotional pattern evolves into a moral guideline. Verbal explanations of right and wrong are important too; they create structure and a moral model. Fortunately, your children will likely provide you with many opportunities for this: if you are like most parents, there is no shortage of transgression that occur unambiguously right under your nose.

*I feel like this is more a confession than a question. I had a horrifying experience at my daughter's preschool last week. I have a habit of checking-in with the director on Friday afternoons. She told me that my daughter has a new favorite game, "Mad Mommy" which is, unfortunately, popular with her peers. The basic gist of it is to get angry, yell, scold and threaten while hitting or pushing the unlucky person designated to be the child. I reassured the director that I never hit my children and she reassured me that she is well aware of my daughter's flare for the dramatic, but I still left feeling accused, defensive, and surprisingly exposed. I truly don't hit my kids; I've never spanked either my daughter or her seven-year-old brother. Nonetheless, I know my anger can boil over. I can see that it scares them at times; at times it scares me. My husband and I both had difficult childhoods with too much violence - physical and emotional too. We promised each other we would treat our children with respect and discipline them calmly, without anger.*

*Because we want them to grow up in a home that isn't tense and filled with conflict, we have always tried to settle our own differences away from our kids. However, as they have gotten older, and as my daughter's will has become stronger, I often fail to live up to my own standards. Sometimes I am able to laugh it off and push reset, but too often I have a hard time getting over things. I find myself hanging onto anger, and resenting my kids. I feel guilty when I get angry with them, but the truth is, I feel satisfied too. The truth is also that I know things are getting out of hand. I have begun to make light of the stories I tell my husband at the end of the day. I don't alter any facts, but I hide how upset I am, or the fact that I am still feeling resentful towards my kids. I am afraid that they are sensing this, even though I never say so, even in my angriest moments. I guess my question is: does this sound normal? And, if not, what I can do to feel and be more patient with my kids? After all, they are just kids.*

Your choice of the word “horrifying” puts a fine point on your experience so we’ll begin by jumping to your question: Yes, this sounds very normal. Actually, more than normal, it is very common. The confessional tone you strike is common too – we speak to parents almost daily who have serious concerns about their own feelings or behaviors toward their children. Unfortunately, as much as our experience would indicate otherwise, most parents we speak to feel very alone in these feelings. Many of the parents we work with spent a good deal of time and energy planning and envisioning how they wanted to parent before their first child arrived. They imagined how they would nurture, encourage, guide and discipline a child. But very few imagined how they would fail themselves, upset their children or falter under the weight of their own expectations, which, of course, are all also part of parenting from time to time. And so, they have no mental model from which to draw guidance and perspective when things go awry. Moms and dads who were fortunate enough to have been brought up by parents who knew how to fail and forgive themselves in front of their children, and who could model the repair process for their kids, tend to be the folks who fare best in the face of their own disappointment. Which leads to an important consideration regarding how best to handle Mad Mommy moments: it’s important to be able to integrate them into the conscious fabric of your family. Our culture provides little guidance for how to use anger except as an instrument of aggression or self-defense. The confounding effects of this perspective are particularly pronounced for adults who grew up in homes where anger was channeled into physical or emotional abuse. By far the most common solution to the problem presented by a lack of a healthy model for anger is to attempt to avoid it as much as possible. Ironically, this leads to more problems, and more anger. We tend to consider a calm presentation as synonymous with not being angry, but any parent who has ever forced “I am asking you nicely ...” through tightly clenched teeth knows, the two are not mutually exclusive. Kids know it too and a “calm” presentation thinly veiling intense emotion is highly unsettling for most kids. Of course, so is explosive anger. You’ll help both yourself and your kids if you can find a way to discuss anger before it explodes. Telling kids you are angry, that you feel yourself getting angry or that you can tell they are angry will not scare them if they do not associate this with an impending explosion. On the other hand, a prohibition against discussing or feeling anger teaches kids that anger is dangerous, and unacceptable; this puts young kids, who are usually angry several times a day, in a tough spot. What you want to do is establish a norm that says your feeling of anger is acceptable, but certain behaviors involved in expressing it are not. One of the best ways to model healthy anger for your kids is in the interactions they witness you having with someone else – such as your husband or their sibling. Your children will benefit greatly from being able to see and hear people say, “I am angry, I am upset...” in a context that doesn’t upend a relationship. It’s also important to make a practice of freely discussing the moments when anger does boil over. If you can be comfortable talking about the times when you break the rules of behavior in your expression of anger, you will reinforce those rules rather than undermine them. You will also provide your children with an opportunity to see you as a whole person who can set goals, have standards, make mistakes and get back on track. And, as they see you this way, they will develop an internal model for how to handle their own emotional missteps. Of course all of this is easier said than done. Refashioning a relationship to anger and conflict requires determination and courage. It’s much easier to do when couples can take on the topic together. Couples therapy can be a good place to examine and rework your shared fears and reactions to anger. Talking with other parents about anger is also very relieving for most of our clients who do so – it offers an experiential answer to the question of “is this normal?” Finally, as distressing as it must be to you to have your less exemplary parenting moments dramatized by four-year-olds, know that your daughter’s impulse to review and replay offers both encouragement and opportunity: The fact that she is talking about, or acting out, her Mad Mommy memories is a good indication that she’s not so anxious about anything that has happened that she needs to avoid the topic. It’s also a wonderful invitation to a playful review – take her up on it. Let her be Mad Mommy, you can be Disobedient Daughter. You are likely to find humor, forgiveness, and a release that is potent for you both.

## Questions

If you have a question you’d like us to answer here, email us at: [symbio@symbiosf.com](mailto:symbio@symbiosf.com).