Dear Bess and Bubby,
When I leave the room, my two children, ages 6 and 8, often start arguing and fighting. What should I do?
Worried in Washington.

Dear Worried,
Basically, you can play one of four roles when your children fight. You can be the Mediator, acting as a third and impartial party to help them work out whatever the issue is between them; you can be the Arbitrator, deciding for them the outcome of the dispute; you can be the Coach, reminding them of any earlier agreements the family might have made about how to resolve conflicts, supporting them in surfacing their feelings, asking questions that help them understand what they want and need in the moment, or encouraging specific behavioral options; or you can be the Fire Breathing Dragon, jumping in and getting all worked up and yelling and shouting yourself. (We don’t particularly recommend the last option, though there are moments when you might be tempted.)

You will need to determine which role is most appropriate for the situation. Perhaps your kids are fussy because they are tired or over-stimulated, and need some time playing apart—a good moment for the Coach to emerge to encourage this option. Perhaps they are having a real dispute and do need help finding a workable solution—call in the Mediator! If they seem to be fighting to get your attention (and you aren’t worried about anyone getting hurt), you might call out cheerfully from the next room, “I’m sure you can work it out!” If you need to be the Arbitrator (especially in cases where physical injury is imminent or already a factor, or where your children are unable, for whatever reason, to work it out themselves), you can step in calmly, direct the players to their various corners (metaphorically speaking), and lay out the solution of your choice.

The long-term answer to your question is, of course, to have some agreements and expectations established while your children are very young about how you will speak to one another, what behaviors are and aren’t acceptable “in our family,” and what methods you will use to negotiate disagreements. This will give your children reliable reference points and a set of boundaries that create the safe space everyone needs to be able to struggle and tussle with each other and come out the other end with more wisdom and more love.


Email Bess and Bubby your own question at <bess&bubby@thepeacecompany.com>. Bess and Bubby cannot promise to answer every question they receive, but post as many as they can on their Web site. Check periodically for updated Bess and Bubby responses.