



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

A Parent Guide for Difficult Behaviors, Part 1 SIBLING RIVALRY

Dear Parent,

Sibling rivalry is not limited to pre-adolescents although it is most evident during the preschool years and most likely to occur when the children are less than 3 years apart in age and when they are of the same gender. Any event that threatens the pre-existing relational position of a child will most likely incite sibling rivalry. Feelings of jealousy and resentment can surface for any change within the family, i.e., a newborn, adopted or foster children, a child with chronic illness, a family member in need of intense care emotionally, academically, or physically, or a child who excels in some way. Children fear that a parent's love for one child limits the possibility of love for another child. Children measure the interaction between the parent and each sibling. Young minds equate *fair* with *identical* while parents know that differences of age, ability and need often eliminate the possibility of identical treatment and that identical treatment is actually unjust in some situations.

Sibling rivalry refers to expressions of resentment, jealousy, or hostility between children of the same family who view themselves as competitors for the love and affection of their parents. It is most likely to occur if parents (1) show favoritism, (2) fail to give adequate attention and affection to each child, (3) are over-indulgent toward one while being over-strict with another, (4) verbally compare one child with another, or (5) exhibit energy, joy, enthusiasm, or excitement over one child but are bland, matter of fact, or adopt a "business as usual" attitude when interacting with another child. Children often express their feelings of jealousy by aggressive or regressive behaviors. Aggressive behavior toward the parent or toward the "intruder" shows itself as anger or hostility. It is an attempt to retaliate for what the child perceives as unfair disregard and lack of appreciation. Regressive behaviors are those in which a child takes steps backward in emotional maturity. For instance, a pre-schooler may want a bottle, return to thumb-sucking, bed-wetting or soiled pants; an older child might eat erratically, act incompetent, whine or act ignorant of previously performed, age-appropriate responses to situations.

Parenting practices can ease tension between siblings. May the suggestions that follow affirm your parenting style and serve as a guide to determine ways that you can counteract sibling rivalry.

SETTLING CONFLICTS: Generally, let siblings work out their own differences. Do not take sides. Avoid getting hooked emotionally. Do not allow yourself to be manipulated by a child who provokes a fight, gets hurt, and then acts like the innocent victim in order to get an older brother or sister in trouble with Mom or Dad.

TRANSITION TIMES: (1) Prepare children for a new baby or a family member with special needs. Include children in creating a family action plan to meet the needs of their sibling. (2) Talk about whatever changes are likely to occur in the family and share about the feelings that might surface because of the changes. (3) As much as possible

avoid disrupting the older children's routines and lifestyles. (4) Make special efforts to interact with each child so that they do not feel discarded or relegated to whatever parent time and energy is left over after the parent tends to the focus child. (5) Establish boundaries of personal territory and possessions for each child in addition to recognizing the areas for common space and shared toys or material things.

EXPRESSING AFFECTION: Explain that personality characteristics are unique from person to person. Consequently, the ways to express love vary. If there is a difference among the family members as to preference

regarding hugs, kisses, verbal praise, etc., explain the difference in order to help children avoid feelings of jealousy when they observe difference in expression.

IT'S MY TURN: Negotiate a system to pre-determine who gets first choice in any spontaneous matter that arises on a given day. For instance: (1) in a two child family, one gets even numbered days; the other gets odd number days. In a three child family, Monday-Thursday, Tuesday-Friday, Wednesday-Saturday, etc., (2) Keep a deck of playing cards handy. Let each member draw a card. High card (or low card) gets first choice, and so on. (3) Toss a coin. (4) Compromise: When neither child will give in, assign 10 minutes for one child's desire and 10 minute for the other child's wish. (5) Fair Plan: Each child lists what they would like to do then agree on a fair plan list that includes activities from each list. (6) Draw Lots: Whichever child draws the number one chooses the activity for the first half hour, etc. Or keep a container with name-labeled popsicle sticks. Whenever the children are rivaling over whose turn it is, pick a stick.

PROMOTE OWNERSHIP: Hold family meetings and include the children in family decision-making.

EQUAL TIME: Regularly give each child an equal amount of parent time to do a child-chosen activity rather than apportioning time based on personal interest in the activity. Provide alone time with a parent, even if it is for an errand.

UNIQUENESS: Discuss how you only want one Joseph and one Ellen; not two Josephs or two Ellens. Assure each that they are loved as a unique individual; not for being more like the other one. Explain that you love her just as much as her brother but because they are two different people, you sometimes do different things with each of them to honor their uniqueness. Try to develop each child's special interests or personality without forcing one to adopt the interests of the other. Do not compare the accomplishments of each other. Encourage your child to concentrate on her own talents; not to focus on her brother's. Help your child to see that all people have strengths and weaknesses. Help your child to identify his own plusses and crosses. Have similar discussions over cartoon characters or storybook characters.

NO FAIR! Teach your children that because of age and need differences they may not be treated *equally* but that they are all treated *fairly*. For instance, "Kathie received more presents than Ronnie but the same amount of money was spent on each child. Kathie's wish list had less expensive items than Ronnie's list." One child does not necessarily get what the other gets. Base decisions on what is best for each child individually and let them know how you arrive at your decisions. When your child accuses, "No Fair! I didn't get to do that", point out things

he has done or received that the other one has not. Consistently point out age difference and state, "At your age his bed time was eight o'clock. When you are his present age you, too, can stay up until ten o'clock." Teach that expectations, responsibilities, and privileges increase with maturity.

TIMELY RESOLUTION: Keep a clock on hand or a timer. Establish the custom that they have three minutes to settle an issue. If they cannot resolve matters by the deadline, then the item is removed from both of them, no matter who is at fault.

NEUTRAL POSITION: Assign the children to neutral corners or a boring room, like the bathroom, to think things out. They cannot come out until they have resolved the problem. Tell them that they are not to look at each other during the thinking time. They usually end up laughing about it.

COOPERATIVE LEARNING: Engage the children in cooperative activities where group effort benefits all. Encourage them to do things together and pool their money to buy things that they both want.

TATTLING: Establish that tattling is not acceptable unless the other is doing something dangerous.

EMPATHY: Try to teach empathy for each other. "How would you feel if your sister treated you that way?" Treat your brothers and sister how you'd like to be treated yourself. Teach them to respect and help each other; to see through the other's eyes.

PERSONAL SPACE: Respect each other's space (bedroom, homework spot, play space). Where children share a bedroom, determine spots that are personal and areas that require compromise. Require that each family member request permission to enter into another's personal space. If disagreements become physical, send each child to her personal space.

SCHEDULING: Devise a program schedule for sharing mutually desirable objects, i.e., computer, electronic game, piano. Or use a timer for thirty minute slots to regulate fairness.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Do not speak to one child about another child unless it is about positive qualities. Sometimes it is necessary to help the "stronger" child to understand that you use of low key praise in front of his siblings is to safeguard their feelings of inferiority.

APOLOGIES REQUIRED: Insist that siblings apologize for unfair or ugly behavior and that they do something loving in restitution.

HUMOR: Good natured humor, not sarcasm, helps to distract and re-direct energy.

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