



Sibling rivalry

Sibling relationships serve an important function in the emotional and social development of children. Siblings actively shape one another's lives and prepare each other for later experiences both within and beyond the family. Children learn many crucial lessons about sharing, competition, and compromise through their interactions with their siblings. For example, learning to cope with disagreements and disputes with one's sibling can help to promote several important skills such as how to:

- Value another person's perspective
- Compromise and negotiate
- Control aggressive impulses

Sibling relationships also provide an arena in which children learn about intimacy, empathy and love. As soon as the child is not the only child, he or she must give up the feeling of being special and unique, but jealousy needs to be resolved in order to develop mature coping strategies for later life. The fact is that our whole society is based on peer competition – in the academic, vocational, romantic and other spheres of life. Sibling rivalry in action is healthy competition, harnessing its aggressive and aspirational aspects in the service of work achievement, which emphasizes differences and rewards results. When handled properly, healthy competition among siblings will lead to the acquisition of social, interpersonal and cognitive skills that are important to the positive development of the child.

Conflict is inherent in all sibling relationships. Conflict among siblings isn't unique to humans; it happens in just about every other animal species that raises several young at the same time. Siblings are commonly ambivalent towards each other. They want to support, love and accept their brother or sister, yet they can feel angry and mistrustful. Real ambivalence exists in all siblings for each other – on one hand, they are available to interact with pleurably and on the other hand, they are competitors for parental attention. Jealousy is a fairly usual emotional reaction among children to actual, supposed or threatened loss of parental attention/affection. Sibling rivalry is classically assumed to exist as a result of the older sibling perceiving the younger sibling as responsible for the decreased affection and attention manifested by the mother towards the self. This may result in the older child's hostility towards the younger child. Initially it may be the older sibling who feels rivaled by the new sibling, but later on, the younger sibling also has to deal with competition for food, toys, approval and attention. However, sibling rivalry works both ways – from older to younger or younger to older. Any perceived discrepancies in parental attention, rewards, rights, privileges, responsibilities are fodder for the sibling rivalry machine.

Infant jealousy is the inevitable outcome of receiving our earliest and most tender loving care within an exclusive relationship. All infants come to expect preferential or exclusive care and all are distressed by the loss of this special status. Differences in jealous behavior depend on an infant's innate temperament interacting with the quality of early care. Through a normal and gradual process of emotional growth, experiences with parents shape the way in which early jealous behaviors are later expressed with siblings.

Sibling rivalry may be expressed by a child's demand to "take the baby back to the hospital; flush it down the toilet; put it back in mummy's tummy". The child may demand attention when the mother is attending to the new baby. He or she may display regressive behavior such as wetting, soiling, demanding to be fed, baby talk, temper tantrums, and clinginess. In some cases, anger may be displaced onto toys, pets, other adults, or physical aggression may be enacted against the younger child. Splitting the parents, as the story of Jacob and Esau relates, is a way to triumph and achieve satisfaction at the expense of the sibling. So having one parent "on-side" against the other child and/or other parent is a classic example of this splitting. There are natural alliances that can set up between a parent and child who "fit well" together, to the subtle exclusion of the other child and/or parent. This produces a situation where envy is rife, and the stage set for intense sibling rivalry.

Myths about infant jealousy:

- Jealousy starts with the arrival of the second child

All children are jealous of their parents' attention – even if they don't have siblings. Children become angry when their expectations (of being attended to, having a toy to themselves) are violated.

- Sibling rivalry is caused by changes in routine and underpreparation

Jealousy is about changes in one's relationship status, not changes in routine. However prepared the child may be, his/her privileged status will be usurped by the next child.

- Sibling rivalry is abnormal

A child's intense rage or jealousy may look "abnormal". The fact is that the child has not yet learned to hide those intense feelings and appear in control. Expecting a toddler to mask her feelings is just not an option.

4. Jealousy is a fixed trait

Jealousy is not a trait and is not resistant to change. It does not signify flawed character, unsatisfactory bonding, underpreparation or poor parenting. Nor does it start the day the newborn comes home.

Factors that contribute to sibling rivalry:

- Intrapersonal factors such as temperament, sensitivity, irritability, activity levels, tolerance of stimulation etc
- Family factors such as lack of family activities that are fun for all; firm family rules about name-calling or aggression; modeling by parents of problem-solving that is respectful and productive
- Secure attachment relationships provide children with a high tolerance for sharing attention, affection, and possessions with siblings. Early unmet needs for consistent, sensitive and responsive caregiving leave children feeling chronically jealous, fearful, demanding and self-absorbed

- Sibling hatred toward a new arrival is more common if the child feels insecure of his/her own potency (e.g. as a result of overprotection, excessive domination, parental impatience or excessive discipline)

Some research findings:

- Sibling rivalry is more common in first born children:
 - May be moved out of own room
 - Relatives pay more attention to the new arrival
- More common in same sex siblings and more common in girls than in boys
- Most common and more severe between 2-4 years of age. The smaller the age difference between the children, the more likely sibling rivalry will occur.
- Less common in children over the age of 8 because they are more confident of their position in the family.
- In general, intensity of rivalry is directly proportional to the closeness of the parent-child relationship. The closer the parent-child relationship (may include “overinvolved” relationships), the greater the hostility shown to the “intruder”.
- Sibling rivalry is more common in siblings of divorced families, because of reduced parental investment in the children.
- Also present in the competition of mothers who compare their children’s developmental achievements, making late developers seem like freaks and failures. Equally, fathers unconsciously place expectations on their children which relate to their own successes or failures in life, rather than respecting the child’s own individual endowments and wishes. Excessive parental expectations (mother and father) make for anxious performance rather than creative achievement and comparisons with better (or worse) siblings are negative incentives which foster hate and envy.

Sibling rivalry can take 3 different forms (2 unhealthy, 1 healthy):

- Heir/heirress – the sibling/s perceive that one child is the parent’s favourite
- Competitors – the siblings all perceive that the parent-favoured child changes depending on current behavior. The children constantly compete to get the most parental attention
- Peers – the siblings perceive that each is recognized as being special to the parent and that they, they siblings, are important to each other as family members.

The management of “peer” sibling rivalry is generally promoted as follows:

- Use a democratic leadership style, in which children are involved in the decision-making process. This obviously applies more to older children than younger

children, but the impression of “having a say” can be accomplished with fairly young children by giving them limited and appropriate choices.

- The parent operates as a mediator rather than judge (again, the caveat about age-appropriateness applies). The parent does not make the decision for the siblings, but helps them problem solve, by stating the problem, helping them generate solutions, choose the best one and writing up a contract (if appropriate).
- Some group discipline techniques include having the siblings swap places to enhance perspective-taking; removing group privileges when siblings cannot agree
- A trap for unwary payers is the attempt to prevent sibling rivalry by being scrupulously fair on all counts – equality in all things. The assumption here is that bad feelings can be treated as unreasonable and that justice can be done and encourages denial of envy and leads to sneaky and secretive behavior rather than open hostility and jealousy. When siblings are treated absolutely equally, the drive to be unique and different from each other can set siblings up against each other in constant competition – each attempting to prevent the other from winning – even by sabotage. Mothers adopt this stance when they find it difficult to be flexible enough to tolerate differences between their children and the need to tailor her time and interventions to the needs of each particular child. Therefore, don't try to strive for equality: Treat the children as individuals with their own developmental needs.
- Try not to foster competition: Don't compare siblings; emphasis each child's unique strengths; praise and reward them together whenever possible.
- Discourage tattling: Tell the child you want to hear what he/she is doing, not what the sibling is doing. Make it clear that you won't tolerate children trying to get each other into trouble. The only exception to this rule is if anyone is in danger of getting hurt.
- Arbitrate and set limits when necessary: Try and let them work out their own solutions. If this isn't possible – then listen to both sides and state the problem (not whose fault it is). Then facilitate problem-solving so they can reach their own solutions. If the problem is clearly with one child, take them aside and explain how this particular piece of social interaction works and give simple instructions for the future.
- Set personal property boundaries: Make separate spaces for each child – with strict rules about not taking each other's things without asking first.
- Individual time: When they are going through a “battle” period, give each of them time with an adult to ease the tension and make them feel personally important.

Direct interventions with children who are adapting to the arrival of a new sibling:

- Educating the older child about the younger, and involving the older child in the management of the younger – providing an identification of the older child with the mother in the handling of the younger child – particularly the caregiving routines such as bathing, feeding, etc.
- Ensuring that the younger child does not get undue favours unless there is some plausible reason given to the older child
- While attending to the younger child in the presence of the older child, the mother involves the older child by speaking about her actions using “we/us” as the pronoun, e.g “let's play with the baby, or let's bath the baby”. This makes the older child feel that he/she is being consulted.



- Some authors suggest that children be spaced at least two to three years apart
- Involve the older child in preparation for the new child
- Age appropriate explanations of pregnancy, birth and arrival of new baby
- Make any room moves long before the arrival of the new baby
- Increase independence and mastery (e.g. eating, dressing) before the baby arrives
- Speak of the new baby as “ours” – reassure the existing child of their uniqueness and special qualities that the new baby won’t have
- Ensure that older children get some gifts at the time of the new birth

Interventions for sibling fighting:

- Don’t react at all – only get involved in children’s disputes if there’s danger of physical harm. If you do intervene, try and resolve the problem WITH them, not FOR them
- Separate the children until they are calm and instruct them to return with at least one idea about how the conflict might have been avoided
- Don’t focus on who is to blame – anyone who is involved is partly responsible (but beware of real bullying)

The good news is that the research suggests that sibling rivalry mellows in later life, as siblings become unique as persons with whom to reminisce, given that they are the repositories of the family stories. The fact is that the longest relationships one will have will be with one’s siblings.