

Take My Sibling, Please!

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Have you ever wondered if they have sibling rivalry in Philadelphia, the "City of Brotherly Love?" I have. I've also wondered about seminars and workshops where people claim to eliminate sibling conflict by using their parenting methods. An article by a doctor claimed that any caring, involved family can stop sibling rivalry, which is "natural, but not necessary." This could be seen as a rather confusing statement. The article tells parents to, among other things, have siblings "make only positive, uplifting comments to each other" and to "constantly look for reasons to praise."

To say you can eliminate sibling rivalry is probably too optimistic and causes many parents to feel either guilty about their parenting or angry at their children for feeling things they shouldn't feel. I've seen some families who can suppress their feelings better than others, but that does not eliminate the rivalry. Sooner or later, if the feelings are not dealt with, they will lead to problematic behavior. Anyone who says they can tell you how to eliminate sibling rivalry is speaking a hyperbole at best and is in denial. These are the same people who say all learning disabilities are just examples of poor parenting, or that diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorder or Hyperactivity Disorder are simply discipline problems. Do not fall for such overly rigid and simplistic thinking.

What Drives Sibling Rivalry?

For our understanding of sibling rivalry, let's look at some of the possible engines that drive it. Some forms of sibling rivalry stems from a normal need to feel special to parents. Children need to feel valued by and secure with their parents. As children are added to the family, there is more competition for the parental goodies. A rivalry emerges. Children also need to feel competent as they progress through the stages of development, so they may feel inadequate compared to the competencies of their siblings. The more these normal needs are frustrated, the more the heat of sibling rivalry can be turned up as the child looks for ways to fill a perceived emptiness.

Sibling rivalry is often more pronounced between same-sex children born consecutively. The second same-sex child usually has to compete within the same cultural arena. If the first born (often the striver) is involved in sports or academics, the second will frequently feel unable to compete in that area. Often, the unpleasant feelings toward the elder sibling results from the inferiority and loss of hope that the younger sibling feels. (In some cases, we see the roles reversed between the first two children.)

If a child's "specialness" is not fulfilled it can often lead to the child needing to be the best, the fastest, etc., an intense competitiveness that is easy to notice. Similarly, over-competitiveness can arise in kids who are indulged so that they are allowed to win too much, creating an inability to have a good attitude about being second best. Either way, the child seeks superlatives in order to fill the hole that is inside, the fear that they are not adequate and acceptable.

Tips for Reducing Sibling Rivalry

How can you help your children contain and control the feelings that can be seen in sibling rivalry?

1. Evaluate yourself. Confront any over-competitiveness you find. Could you be modeling this behavior to your children? I have noticed in some of my male friends an intense competitiveness when we play basketball or other games. You can see the remnants of sibling rivalry and insecurity still there in the fear of not being better than the other players. This will pass down to the generations if we are not careful to stop it within ourselves.
2. Set aside many "hit and run" moments to validate, compliment, and otherwise build up your most rivalry-focused child. Be sure he/she hears on a regular basis from you that you are pleased and satisfied. Show moments of tenderness that are not connected with achievement or behavior.
3. Practice the forgiveness model. I have shared this in a previous column and it is worth pointing out again. When children wrong others, they should be asked to walk through the following steps when they are emotionally ready and in control of themselves: a) "I was wrong to hit you," b) "I will work on handling my anger in a better way," and c) "Would you forgive me?" In this way, the wrong is acknowledged, a commitment to change (repentance) is made, and forgiveness is requested (humility). This is called "making it right" around our home. If someone takes his sibling's property and it is lost or ruined, two things must occur: a reasonable consequence for the behavior (say, paying for a new item plus interest or an extra dollar for punitive damages), and the interpersonal walk through the forgiveness steps. This affirms each child's value and the importance of respect in the face of unpleasant feelings.
4. Gently and consistently steer your language away from "win/lose" or "success/failure" phrases. Reinforce cooperation and consistently discipline competitive outbursts. Rather than verbally reassuring a "hot head" that things are okay, lovingly give him a time-out from the game until he makes the choice to control himself.
5. Catch rivalry-focused children in cooperative behaviors, even when the behaviors are small. "Hey, I noticed that you were kind to your sister . . . did you see that?" "I see kindness and self-control growing in you," or, "You let your brother dribble the ball instead of you shooting all the time . . . that was cool."
6. Realize children sometimes need time away from each other. This is common sense and it applies to homeschooling families in particular. Children grow weary of each other's ways at times. Provide time apart for them without feeling guilty or shaming them. An interesting opinion I have heard is that children should never be left alone with other children (outside earshot of an adult) until they reach the teen years. This has no Biblical mandate behind it and it suggests a tremendous need to control on the part of the parent. This need to control usually stems from deep seated fears that things will go badly if we aren't directing the situation. In parenting, however, we must increasingly strengthen our children's choosing self and let go of direct control in favor of the child's growing self-control.

We should seek a balance here, of course. Some authors seem to teach handing over control only after the child leaves home. Be careful when writers and speakers (including yours truly) say that things are a Biblical mandate. Weigh everything with the whole council of God's Word. Remember, the Word teaches that a person will be in serious trouble with God if we "tinker" with Scripture.

7. Be sure to honor boundaries and personal space within the family. Rooms and possessions are a part of defining boundaries and personal respect. The Bible teaches the importance of this respect. Don't let children invade their siblings' space without making it right and giving proper consequences. Too often, older children are forced to accept their younger siblings' rummaging through their possessions or violating their privacy because the parents insist that the older ones be "more mature." What we often do is set them up for anger toward the younger ones because we are supporting an atmosphere of sibling rivalry in the name of being generous. Their anger is really toward the parent because they are unknowingly encouraging disrespect but the feelings are directed at the sibling.

8. Encourage your child to display decent behavior. Say things like, "I know you can't stand Jimmy sometimes, but when you mistreat him, I will discipline you," or, "I understand you feel hurt because it seems Mary gets all our attention but you must figure out better ways to handle your anger or consequences will come down. Now, how can you express your frustration in a respectful way?" Each example of sibling rivalry can be viewed as a great opportunity to teach (assuming we can keep our own feelings in control long enough to help our kids!)

What would you say to a child who says, "I can't stand my brother . . . I will never like him . . . he's a jerk." Many would say, "How dare you say that!" or, "If I hear any more of that, you will be disciplined." How can the parent help the troubled child deal with this feeling without having to just make it go away (a favorite goal of alcoholics and other addictive people)? Perhaps the parents could acknowledge the feeling and help the child identify what it is that angers him or her. Perhaps he feels displaced by his sibling or inadequate around his sibling's successes. Help the child identify the root of the anger and then take appropriate steps to deal with the need.

Things Not to Say Under Any Circumstance:

1. "Jesus doesn't want you to feel that way toward your sister. God isn't pleased with you disliking your sister." These are attempts to manipulate our children using shame and fear of God's abandonment. In this example, we are trying to change our children, not trying to help them work through their feelings so they can change themselves. At best, this technique gets kids to go underground with their feelings and carry with them a terrible sense of shame for normal feelings.

2. "I thought you rededicated your life to the Lord at camp . . . why are you having such a bad time with your brother?" Again, this supposes that unpleasant feelings between siblings is a sign of sin or lack of spirituality. It teaches children that there are certain feelings they have a right to feel and certain ones they don't have a right to feel. The trouble with this is that it is not Biblical and it doesn't teach them what to do with the feelings they have other than to deny them. Denying the truth about what is inside is not of God and will not help them make Godly choices in the future.

3. "You shouldn't feel that way . . . he doesn't mean to hurt you. He's your brother and you should love him." This shows that the parent just can't tolerate and accept the truth of what the child feels. This invalidates the child and makes it seem he is bad to have anything but the most pleasant feelings all the time toward loved ones. This is not real.

4. Don't make your children hug and say "I love you" when they are still fresh into their anger with one another. Give them time to work through the feelings and help them get to the place where they can choose to reconnect. Parents who force kids to "act" in the socially acceptable way when they have strong, opposite feelings are not accepting reality. It is a sign of the fear of unpleasant feelings that resides in the parent. Be sure you don't teach your children to deny truthful and painful emotions.

5. Don't tell them they should repent from their feelings, as if they are sinning to feel irritation at their sibling.

6. Don't say, "Your sister likes you, why, can't you like her?" This compares kids and nullifies the child's difference from his or her sister. There could be two viewpoints here so don't ignore one by implying it has no basis because the other person doesn't feel the same way.

Let's do our best to help children work through these feelings of irritation with their siblings. They'll certainly have people with whom they struggle in their future at work or college. It will come. How well will your children be prepared? Do your best to accept the normal, unpleasant feelings that arise in siblings. Let's be thankful we can guide our children in the ways of healthy and Godly living.

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