

Avoiding Sibling Rivalry

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Many people believe that sibling rivalry is inevitable. They are incorrect.

Over the past 12 years, I have counselled many parents concerning the day-to-day interactions between their children. A distinct need has emerged: a solution that improves parents' effectiveness in guiding sibling relationships.

Easily one of the most disheartening experiences as a parent is having someone you love being violently angry at someone you love. Few things are as distressing as feeling pulled between your love for one child and your love for your other child.

The wrong advice

Standard parenting advice for this problem includes separating the children, spending time with each child independently, and using reflective listening skills. Each of these has limited effectiveness, which is the problem. If they were all simple failures, the path would be clear: find another tool. Since these tools work a little bit, sometimes, for reasons we often don't understand, it's easy for

any parenting expert to say 'do this' if only because it worked for him, with some of his children, some of the time.

Is that a good enough for most parents? It is my experience that parents are thirsty for a great deal more than 'sometimes', when it comes to the advice they seek.

I'll address this advice one piece at a time, explain why it doesn't work often enough, and suggest alternatives that have more promise.

First: separate the children

For the same reason that trial separations usually turn into permanent separations and divorce, this doesn't work very well. When the people who irritate us are not around, we often don't take responsibility for our behaviour but we do find fault with the other person. Kids are people, and they will use the time apart as proof that it is the sibling who is to blame.

Another problem is at the heart of why separation really doesn't work to reduce sibling rivalry: people only get better at using new skills under two conditions.:

1. instruction or guidance from someone who already has the skills, and,
2. ample opportunities to use the skills.

Being told to behave in a new way

doesn't work if there are limited opportunities to practice and little feedback on how she's improving. This means our children need our supervision while they learn how to get along with their siblings (and the rest of humanity), as much as they need regular chances to practice getting along.

Second: spend individual time with each child

The second most common piece of parenting advice I hear about sibling rivalry is: spend time with each child independently. On the face of it, this appears to address what is often identified as the primary unmet need underlying sibling rivalry: the parent's attention. It isn't.

The reason this advice actually adds to the problem is because children are naturally afraid of abandonment - for themselves and for their siblings (who they really do love, regardless of their behaviour). Separating the children and spending time with them individually gives rise to the fear that some day mom and dad will choose the one they really like and not return to the others.

The children who know they are the favourites fear this on behalf of their siblings as much as their brothers and sisters fear it for themselves. Fear generates a lot of the poor behaviour.

This also adds to the competition

children create among themselves as they begin tracking the number of minutes, or comparing the cool outings or amount of money spent on each child and equating that with the amount of love each is worthy of, which helps nothing.

The primary unmet need that drives sibling rivalry is the need for safety. Children want and need a sense of security.

Safety is assured by a parent who disarms a child's fears. This one is simple and direct: tell your children that when you love one of them you still also love the others. Explain that love is not a pie to be shared in smaller portions as it is divided up among more people, but like a flame that brightens as more fuel is added. Children really do need to be told this, and shown this, because they cannot know things that they have not yet learned.

Third: use active-listening skills

Finally, there is the advice: use empathic listening skills, talk to kids about what they and their siblings are feeling. This doesn't work very well, either, but only for one good reason: empathic listening is really effective in building a relationship, not controlling behaviour.

True, when you have an excellent, connected relationship you also have a great deal of influence over their choices. That is not the same as control. If this is your primary purpose in listening, you will be frustrated almost immediately. I say 'almost immediately' because some children can be manipulated using emotion-based language for a time

before they become enraged over having been tricked.

What Really Works

Fortunately for us all, there is another choice: meet the child's needs as they arise.

Poor behaviour choices stem from an attempt to meet one or more of what William Glasser describes as fundamental human needs:

1. Survival (food, shelter, etc.)
2. Love and belonging
3. Power
4. Freedom
5. Fun

When a child is violently angry (which happens, they are human), there is a reason. He is not feeling balanced so he is behaving in a way to control other people to meet his needs (it doesn't work, it makes people move away rather than toward him, but most coping skills are like that).

He is feeling out of control, and, in his search for satisfaction he attempts to force his will on others. This works when the others involved are teddy bears, but little brothers and big sisters are pretty stropky when it comes to being pushed around by siblings.

To assess what he needs, a study of the behaviour is usually enough. The unmet need for survival looks frantic, and competitive. The unmet need for love looks annoying (children and adults will irritate people to get their attention, which they will take instead of the love they really need). Power comes out looking like physical force and rebellion, as does the need for freedom. The unmet need for fun looks like basketballs in the living room or provoking a sister during a

long drive.

When we identify the need, we can circumvent the behaviour. We can model the behaviour we want to see, and give our children the feedback they need to stay on track. We can eliminate sibling rivalry, under one condition: we believe it is possible to circumvent the behaviour because we don't believe that sibling rivalry is inevitable and only to be endured. Agreed?

Sibling rivalry is optional.

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