

Published May 26th, 2010

## Family Focus: Avoiding Sibling Rivalry, Part 2

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sensible approach will eliminate a whining mantra of "It's not fair, he has more, she got to sit in front, he has a bigger piece . . ."

- Encourage your children to pursue different activities to reduce the chance of competition. However, if they enjoy the same activity, say swimming or lacrosse, and can be supportive of each other and their differing abilities, a shared activity can bring them closer.
- Establish rules for behavior with siblings and others. Some examples include: no name-calling, no physical violence, no damage to property, and taking a time-out period to cool off.
- Teach your children conflict resolution skills, especially how to use "I" messages instead of blaming and attacking the other person.
- " Don't interfere in your children's disputes unless there is a possibility of physical violence. (If so, implement established consequences for physical violence without getting involved in the actual dispute). Often the child who screams the loudest will arouse your protective instincts, and you may wind up scolding the wrong child. Even if you witness every detail of the altercation, try to avoid getting involved. Inevitably, one child will feel you are siding with the other. Instead, encourage them to work out their own conflicts. You can tell them you're sorry they're having such a hard time, and that you trust they will work it out. Their relationship will become stronger in the process.
- Most importantly, catch your children being kind, considerate, and supportive with each other. Let each child know when you see him being a good sibling and how lucky his brother or sister is to have him. In other words, focus on the positive and try to ignore the negative. The hope is that your children will also follow this example!

Miranda cried as she sat in my office and described how her mother has always loved her younger sister the most. A very sad situation for Miranda, especially considering she is fifty years old! Painful feelings about siblings and possible favoritism carry on well beyond our younger years. Miranda's mother has frequently stated with pride how alike she and her younger daughter are. On the other hand, she tells Miranda that her appearance and personality are very different from anyone else's in the family. Miranda interprets this to mean that her mother favors her sister, even if this is not at all what her mother intends. And, of course, Miranda resents her sister for supposedly being the chosen child.

If you ask most parents, they will say their hope is that their children will be close and will grow up to become supportive friends with each other. Yet persistent sibling friction can often be tied to parenting attitudes and behavior.

One well-intentioned set of parents inadvertently fostered rivalry among their three sons. These parents tried to highlight each child's strengths by proclaiming how Aaron was the athlete in the family, Justin was the creative one, and Bradley was the academic one. In working with the family, it came out that each boy felt restricted to his designated role and that he could never be good enough in the areas assigned to his brothers. Labeling children, even in positive ways, can backfire. Every child wants to feel unique and special, with unlimited future potential.

Some sibling rivalry is inevitable, but you can limit the extent in various ways. Here are a few suggestions (out of many possibilities):

" Don't try to be fair all the time. Your efforts will only create more sibling conflict. Tell your children you will do your best to be fair, but that it is humanly impossible. Sometimes one child will have an advantage, and sometimes another will. Eventually it will balance out. If one child feels very unfairly treated, you want him to come to you in private and let you know. The hope is that this calm,

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