

HOW TO PREVENT SIBLING RIVALRY

by Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

A plethora of books, articles, videos, and advice about how to prevent or to handle sibling rivalry is available for parents with two or more children. But to what degree is all this information useful? How valuable is it really?

In fact, many experts fail to do what is perhaps most important when it comes to dealing with sibling rivalry: look at what is happening through the child's emotional eyes. And so the parents they advise also fall short in this way. Parents try hard to be helpful, but they do so from the point of view of a caring parent. They don't always understand what their children are trying to tell them.

For a moment, imagine yourself as an infant. Look at and feel things as they're experienced through an infant's emotional eyes. A baby can't do anything for itself. It is completely vulnerable. It depends on its primary caregiver for its safety and for the fulfillment of all its needs.

Starting as infants, children need to learn with whom they can feel safe. They need to learn whom they can trust. They need to feel fully secure in the love of significant others so they are resilient and don't feel overly vulnerable when another child comes along. Although research shows that children need this kind of responsive and consistent pattern of love to develop security, these findings have been insufficiently emphasized by most child development experts.

Understanding the cause of sibling rivalry is the only way parents can prevent or reduce it. And the child's sense of security is the key to this. The cause of sibling rivalry stems from the idea that the young sibling is a threat to the older child's secure sense of self.

Let's look more closely at what I'm calling the child's secure sense of self. The sense of self—secure or insecure—is how the child feels as an individual and as a family member. It is the emotional picture each child has of himself or herself. A child's secure sense of self develops gradually through interactions with the child's primary caregivers. How parents respond to their infant's or young child's very existence is the crucial determinant of that child's sense of security.

Consider two mothers who are on the phone when their 18-month-old daughter begins fussing. Jill's mother holds her phone with one shoulder as she prepares and hands a bottle to her daughter. Jill sits on the floor and feeds, while her mother talks to her friend. On the other hand,

Jane's mother promises her friend to phone back later. She takes Jane on her lap and smiles at and talks with her while she feeds, and is alert to any other unmet needs that might cause her daughter's fussing. It isn't hard to imagine which child feels more loved, relaxed, valued, and secure.

It is very important for parents to realize that if an older child feels his or her needs will not be met, that child will feel frustrated. This frustration can grow quickly into an anger that this child then takes out on a younger sibling. Parents who think 3-, or 4-, or 5-year-old siblings already feel completely secure greatly misunderstand the normal developmental needs of preschool-age children. These parents sow the seeds of sibling rivalry.

Consider how this happens. A child is 2 or 3 years of age, and onto the scene comes a new baby. The older child still has strong needs to feel secure in the parents' love, still feels vulnerable, still is learning to build trust. But the baby is far more dependent and its needs are stronger. And, in the eyes of the older child, the baby gets all the affection and attention. Mommy's always soothing its cries! Mommy's always holding and rocking it! The very caregiving behaviors the older child still needs within the family are now being given regularly to the younger sibling. So the younger child is perceived by the older child as a threat to his or her security.

The older child thinks, "I was receiving all that love and attention from my parent. It made me feel special. I felt safe. Now everything's going to the baby, not me. I feel bad. I'm scared. I'm angry! When the baby gets everything because it is more dependent than I am, that threatens my sense of self." Of course, the child's thoughts aren't so articulate, but this is the gist of his or her feeling. The threat to the older child's sense of self can be felt especially severely if that child's powerful early needs for love, attention, recognition, and a trustworthy environment were frustrated and not adequately met.

This is the cause of sibling rivalry: the older child perceives the younger sibling's very existence as a threat to his or her security. If this is the cause of rivalry, then inherent in the cause is its prevention or cure. Sibling rivalry can be prevented if the older child learns to see the presence of the younger child as something that enhances the secure sense of self of the older child.

But how, you might ask, can this be done in day-to-day life with children? If you are able to see through the emotional lens of the older child, what to do becomes obvious. Here are some examples.

Many children aged 3 to 5 are in day care or preschool and know a teacher. These youngsters see teachers as important and helpful people. They feel proud when a parent likens them to a teacher. This parental expression of love and recognition, therefore, builds the older child's secure sense of self and reduces or eliminates sibling rivalry.

For instance, when your baby begins to crawl, you can approach the older child and say in a pleased manner, “Look, your sister is starting to crawl. Guess who taught her how to crawl? You did! She’s copying you. You’re a good teacher!”

The older child is getting love and recognition from you. What is the cause for these good feelings? From child’s point of view, it’s the baby. Why would the older child continue to be contemptuous or feel rivalrous toward a younger sibling when the older child sees the younger sibling as the reason he or she is receiving affection, attention, and recognition from their parents?

When the younger child starts to use a fork or cup at the dinner table, you can go to the older sibling and whisper excitedly, “Look, your brother’s holding his cup by himself. Who do you think showed him how to hold a cup? Your brother learned from watching you! He likes you and imitates you. You’re important. I’m proud of you.”

When the younger child appropriates the older child’s toy, to stave off World War IV, you can give the older child a hug, look into his eyes, and say, “Your sister has been watching you play! She’s imitating how you do it. You’re a great older brother. Maybe you can play with her and show her what else you know.”

Another way to counteract sibling rivalry is for parents to model cooperation. You can show your children how to cooperate and can articulate the value of cooperation. For example, at dinnertime, the mother might cook while the father sets the table. Often this is done silently. An important opportunity for teaching values is missed. Instead, the father can say to the kids, “Look, in this family we’re a team. We believe in working together. I could use your help setting the table. Which color napkins would you like to put on the table tonight, the pink or the green?”

As they grow older, the children can participate in more advanced cooperative tasks and chores, as well as fun activities, either together or with adult family members. When one child helps a sibling, you can acknowledge that behavior by saying, “See, cooperation makes it happen. I’m proud of you kids!”

Modeling and talking about cooperative behavior can improve interpersonal relationships within the family. But the single most important thing for parents to understand is that the older child must realize the younger sibling is not a threat. Parents must ensure the older child feels the younger sibling is an asset to the older child’s secure sense of self. This is the basic remedy for sibling rivalry.