

Parent

pages



Resources for Christian parents in the 21st Century

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Sibling Rivalries

“The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, ‘Why is this happening to me?’” **Gen. 25:22**

If you think you are the only parent who has to deal with sibling rivalry, remember Rebekah. Her children, Jacob and Esau, were already fighting in the womb. Later, they probably argued over who got to sit in the front of the camel.

Sibling rivalry is not a new concept, but that doesn't make it easy to live with. Some days you gaze at that family picture, with the head of the younger sibling lovingly resting on the shoulder of the elder, and wonder to whose family those kids belong. They can't be the same children who fought over everything from breakfast cereal to bedtime snacks the day before.

“Esau held a grudge against Jacob . . .” **Gen. 27:41**

If it seems your children are fighting all the time, you may not be far from wrong. Research done at the University of Illinois shows that not only do siblings (ages 3-7) spend more time with each other than with anyone else in their lives, they fight on average 3.5 times every hour. Slightly younger children can spat as often as every 10 minutes.

While the research did not cover time spent traveling, as a parent I feel confident that in a mini-van on a cross country trip, those numbers could be marked as the number of fights per mile.



“But Jacob said, ‘Swear to me first,’ so he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.” **Gen. 25:33**

Children fight, manipulate, tease, whine, and bargain as a way of developing social skills. They are learning how to resolve controversy.

How they learn at home will predict the skills they will use outside the family. The times when siblings play well together is also a training ground for future friendships. When children get to school they are merely practicing the relationships they have developed and learned at home in their families.

Just as Jacob learned to get what he wanted from Esau through trickery, he also tricked his father and his father-in-

law later in life. Children who manipulate at home, will repeat the behavior as they grow up. Children who practice compromise and negotiation with their siblings will have those skills when they go to school or enter the work world.

Those annoying and exacerbating sibling squabbles are an opportune time to help your children develop good conflict resolution skills. When kindergartners tattle to me, I teach them how to work things out with each other. This way they feel more confident with their friends and still know that teacher help is available.

When children are fighting and come tattling, ignore the whine and stand them face-to-face. One child at a time says to the other, “I don't like it when . . .” (you

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take all the cars, when you pinch me, when you say I can't play, etc.).

Then the second child gets a turn. No arguing about what is true, no bringing up past

injustices, no arguing about whether someone should or shouldn't feel that way. These behaviors tend to be manipulation techniques that confuse the situation.



The children simply tell what they don't like and find a way to play better.

Explain to the children that God asks us to teach each other how to be good friends and play fair. This resonates well with children who are not likely to see their own fault in the situation. This strategy makes it easier for children to practice sincere repentance and forgiveness.

A strategy such as this will encourage your children to compromise and negotiate on their own. While it is preferable that parents stay in the background as much as possible, your "ears" should always be in attendance.

If one sibling seems to always compromise and the other frequently negotiates the best deal, you will want to monitor the situation for sibling bullying. It is best for the emotional health of each child that the bully and the victim both learn to compromise and negotiate. They will head to school more confident in their relationships with their peers.

"Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob." Gen. 25:28

Parent favoritism, whether real or perceived, is a strong issue for siblings. The need to counteract favoritism is the way children learn and practice manipulation. They quickly learn which parent is

most likely to say "yes" and which sibling is most likely to receive a "yes." They use this to play one parent off the other.

This behavior is reinforced as children consider that what works at home is bound to work at school. As parents, we know that no two children can be treated exactly alike. But as adults, we are

responsible for being as fair as we can in meeting the needs of all our children.

Be careful when mediating a disagreement, especially a grudge that seems to constantly reoccur. The way you treat each child is how they learn to treat others and how they learn to be treated by others. Be sure to praise and recognize children for what they do well and avoid—like the plague—any comparisons to siblings. It is normal for second or third children to develop different personalities or interests from an older sibling. Observe your children and develop good relationships with each one. Celebrate each child as a unique gift from God.

The issue of favoritism becomes a bit cloudy when one child in the family simply needs more time. One child may be gifted in an area which requires more money and time spent to develop that gift. Another child may struggle with a learning disability and require more help to get through school.

Children with physical handicaps or illnesses certainly require more family resources and attention. Each family is the way God intended it to be. God loves each child perfectly and equally. He is concerned for their growth.

If you have a child or two who live in the shadow of a special needs child, pray to God to show you how to meet the

needs of all the children He has entrusted to your care. Lift all of your children to God in prayer and He will help you.

"For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably." Gen. 33:10

God used the fights and tricks between Jacob and Esau for good. Both were successful in their lives. Though Jacob fled his home in fear of his life, years later he returned and was welcomed by the open arms of his brother.

Take solace in the fact that most siblings who argue as youngsters grow to be very close as adults. The relationship of siblings is usually longer in years than the relationship with parents or spouses. It spans a huge time of growth and development—a growth from feud to friendship.

For discussion

1. If you had siblings, reflect on your rivalries. Did you learn negotiation or manipulation techniques? Did one sibling always seem to have the upper-hand?
2. Do you still use similar techniques in your adult relationships that you did in your relationships with your brothers or sisters?
3. How has your relationship with your siblings changed?
4. What is your prayer for the sibling relationships of your children?
5. How does a child with an illness or disability change the nature of sibling rivalry?

For further study:

- The story of Jacob and Esau: Gen. 25, 27-28, 32-33.
- The story of Rachel and Leah: Gen. 29-30.
- The story of Joseph and his brothers: Gen. 37, 42-45.
- "The New Science of Siblings" *Time* magazine, July 10, 2006.

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