

"I was a Better Parent Before I had Kids!"

An Interactive 6-session Parenting Series exclusively for parents of our preschool with School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski.



Parent Enrichment Program Session 4 Discussion Notes

Topic: "Keep the Siblings, Lose the Rivalry!"

This discussion was led by School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski on March 19th, 2014. The discussion notes below were written by Dr. Dobkowski.

I. Introduction

- The very mention of the words "sibling rivalry" triggers an immediate and intense reaction. Parents will often comment that they "get along" fine with each child individually, but when the two children are together, they cannot deal with either one.
 - Lethal Combination: Two children in competition for their parents' love and attention; the envy that one child feels for the accomplishments of the other; the resentment that each child feels for the privileges of the other.
 - Sibling relationships in the Torah: Yosef and his brothers; Yaakov and Eisav.
- **Where does sibling rivalry begin? What causes siblings to fight?**
- Experts in the field seem to agree that at the root of sibling jealousy is each child's deep desire for the exclusive love and attention of his parents. Parents are the source for warmth, a sense of identity, a sense of worth, and of specialness.
 - The mere existence of a sibling signifies less time alone with parents, less attention for disappointments, and less approval for accomplishments.
 - This creates an incredibly difficult task for parents. They have to find ways to reassure each child that they are safe, special, and beloved.
 - Evolving Needs: Children's changing needs and identities can impact how they relate to their siblings. Toddlers are naturally protective of their toys and belongings and are learning to assert their will. School-age children often have a strong concept of fairness and equality so they might not understand why siblings of other ages are treated differently. Teenagers are developing a sense of individuality and independence and may resent involvement with younger siblings.
 - Individual temperaments: A child's individual temperament (i.e., mood, disposition, adaptability, etc.) and their unique personalities play a significant role in how well they get along with other family members.
 - Role models: The way parents resolve problems and disagreements set a strong example for children.
 - Theory of Birth Order: We treat our children according to their birth order ("This is my oldest, this is my middle, and this is my baby"). Sometimes we treat them according to our birth order. For example, we may tend to identify with the child whose role corresponds most closely to our own as we were growing up.
 - Alfred Adler (Austrian psychiatrist), a contemporary of Freud and Jung, was one of the first theorists to suggest that birth order impacts personality. Some psychologists suggest that the secret to sibling personality differences lies in the birth order.

II. Parents' contribution to sibling rivalry

How do adults contribute to the fierce competition amongst siblings?

- Birth order---Parenting---Behavior: Parents are usually extremely attentive, stringent with rules, and overly neurotic regarding the minutiae with their first child. This may cause the child to become a perfectionist, always striving to please his parents. In contrast, the raising

- of a second child may result in less of an iron fist due to their experiences with their first child. This may cause the second child to be less of a perfectionist.
- Do not lock the children into their position in the family constellation. Allow each child the opportunity to experience some of the privileges and responsibilities of the other. Part of what creates deep resentment between siblings is the demand by parents that they always maintain their family position.
 - A parents' tendency to compare undoubtedly increases the rivalry. We compare when we are angry ("Why do you always have to be the one to keep the family waiting? Your brother was ready ten minutes ago!"). We also compare when we are pleased ("Great job! That took your brother one hour to complete, and you finished in 15 minutes").
 - To combat making comparisons, describe what you see or feel ("I see you picked up your blocks, trucks and even put away your puzzle pieces"), describe the problem/what you like or what you do not like ("It is hard for me to be helpful when I being yelled at and criticized"), and what needs to get done. The key is to focus on the child's individual behavior.
 - We live in a competitive society. Doesn't a child need competition at home to prepare him to hold his own in the outside world? A child can learn to function competently, assert himself, and achieve his goals in an environment that encourages cooperation. Being raised in a cooperative climate, can help children learn respect for others and gain more confidence in oneself.

III. Benefits of sibling rivalry

- It teaches our children how to solve conflicts (conflict resolution skills). From the normal irritations of living together, children learn how to assert themselves, defend themselves, and compromise.
- From their struggles to establish dominance of each other, siblings become tougher and more resilient.
- From their verbal sparring, children learn the difference between being clever and being hurtful.
- From the envy of each other's unique abilities, children become inspired to work harder, persist, and achieve.
- Children learn the invaluable lesson that "life is not fair." There are inequities in life.
 1. There will be times when a parent cannot give equally, and that is fine.
 2. Parents do not need to respond to their children at all times with equal passion.
 3. Sometimes one child needs more than the other.
 4. Parents need to seek out the specialness of each child and value each child's individuality. Parents need to be proactive in providing their children with one-on-one attention directed to their interests and needs.
 5. Instead of giving equal amounts, parents should give according to individual need. Similarly, instead of giving equal time, parents should give time according to need.
- Children need to be able to express their feelings and wishes about their siblings (even the unsavory thoughts). As parents, our job is to demonstrate how to express this anger in a constructive way without doing damage. This helps children learn how to control their aggressive impulses.
- Children learn how to value another person's perspective.

- By managing sibling rivalry adeptly, we teach children how to cope with these challenges. Every household needs sibling rivalry!

IV. How should parents manage these conflicts? How to intervene helpfully?

- Instead of dismissing negative feelings about a sibling, acknowledge the feelings. Acknowledge the children's anger towards each other.
Ex: Child: "You are always with the baby."
Parent: "No I am not. Didn't I just read you a book?" (Don't)
"You don't like when I spend too much time with her." (Do).
Ex: Child: "Mom, Yosef said I sound stupid."
Parent: "Just ignore him." (Don't)
"A comment like that could make you mad." (Do)
- Listen to each child's side with respect and reflect each child's point of view.
Ex: "You two sound mad at each other."
"So it was your idea to build a zoo and you wanted to build it by yourself. But when you saw him playing, you wanted to play too."
- Show appreciation for the difficulty of the problem and express faith in their ability to work out a mutually agreeable solution.
- Whenever possible, parents should not get involved. Establish a healthy balance of allowing children the freedom to resolve their own differences and accepting adult intervention when necessary.
- Parents intervene, *not* for the purpose of settling an argument or making a judgment, but to open blocked channels of communication. The key is to resolve conflict *with* the children and *not for them*.
- When parents resolve conflicts for children, the children end up becoming more dependent upon the parent and more hostile towards their siblings.
- The ideal goal is for parents *not* to interfere, with the understanding that if they must step in, it is with the thought process that at the earliest time possible they will turn the children back to dealing with each other.
- Do not put pressure on your children to love each other. The love and respect has to come naturally. A parent cannot impose love.
- Children need a lot of experience having good times together and sharing positive feelings so that when the conflicts and fights do come, they have a strong foundation to fall back on.
- Make sure each child gets some time alone with his parents at least one time a week. Also, when spending alone time with one child, do not discuss the other children.
- Examples of unhelpful responses to siblings who are fighting: The Don't's-
 1. "Who started it? The truth now!"- Do not try to figure out who started the conflict. This will only lead to more conflict and resentment.
 2. "Shame on you for fighting over some little toys. Every time I look at you two, you are fighting."
 3. "I don't care how it started, I want it to stop."- Acknowledge each child's feelings.
 4. "You are too old for these toys. Give them to your sister and play with something else."- As much as possible, hand the responsibility of solving the conflict to the children.
 5. "I am taking these toys away and you can both go to your rooms."

V. When children cannot work out problems on their own

- Set ground rules for appropriate behavior. Solicit the children's input on the rules as well as the consequences when they break them. This educates children that they are responsible for their own actions, regardless of the situation or how provoked they felt.
- Parents should make sure that their children have their own space and time to do their own thing. For example, to play with toys by themselves, to play with friends without a sibling tagging along, or to enjoy activities without having to share equally.
- If the fighting is happening frequently, hold weekly family meetings in which the "house rules" regarding fighting are repeated and past successes in reducing conflict is reviewed. In this meeting, parents can:
 1. Write down each child's feelings and concerns and read them aloud.
 2. Invite each child to come up with solutions. Write down all ideas without evaluating.
 3. Collectively decide upon the solutions that everyone can manage.
- Parents can consider establishing a program where the children earn points toward a fun family-oriented activity if they work together to reduce the fighting.
- Aside from not forcing sharing, how else could you encourage it?
 1. Put the children in charge of the sharing.
 2. Point out the advantages of sharing.
 3. Show appreciation for sharing when it happens spontaneously.