

SIBLING RIVALRY

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All children (and adults) need to feel belonging and significance in their family. When a child goes from being an only child to being the oldest, a new dynamic is created in the family, and it is the beginning of potential competition between the two new siblings. All families that have two or more children will experience some sort of sibling rivalry, whether it is pronounced or muted (children don't have to be arguing, whining or fighting to compete for a "special place").

Our personalities are influenced by our birth order. Certainly not exclusively, as parenting styles, genetics, cultural backgrounds, socio-economic status and education play major roles as well. But, birth order plays a big role in a child's perception of how and where they fit in their family. The moment a new baby is brought home the older child often feels some sense of being "dethroned," that they have lost their special place in the family. This can manifest itself in many ways: whining, crying, aggression to the new sibling, attention seeking behavior, competition, etc. And while these behaviors may vary, it's important to understand that most first born children experience the perception of being "dethroned" at some point. They want to know that they are still unique, and important to their parents and the family, and this is the beginning of competition and sibling rivalry in the family.

It may happen early on, or it may be delayed until they are older, but children begin to take on typical birth order traits at some point. The oldest children often seek to be the first and most successful (they can also 'give up' if they feel that this isn't possible), and to be in charge. The second child often seeks to find a different path to belonging and significance than the first. If the first child is mischievous or rebellious then the second child will often be "an angel" and vice-versa. Second children tend to be very concerned with fairness and justness, and may try hard to catch up with the first or rebel. Youngest children may believe they need special attention or are entitled. Only children frequently have a strong desire to be special.

While common birth-order characteristics are generalities, and may vary from family to family, they are important to understand, as we seek to provide an environment in the family that encourages cooperation and fairness while honoring and nurturing each child's uniqueness. Everyone needs to feel that they are an important part of the family, that they are loved for who they are and that they are accepted.

Here are some tools to promote belonging and significance and reduce sibling rivalry:

New Baby

1. Acceptance of change: The birth of a new baby means change. They require much focus and attention, and parents often feel guilty because they are not able to give the oldest child as much attention and focus. This is a natural turn of events, and is not bad or good. It is change. Understanding, empathy and encouragement are the focus. Avoid rescuing and enabling behavior (e.g. giving into demands, whining, and tantrums).
2. Validate your child's feeling of jealousy and show compassion vs. sympathy. It is natural to feel jealous of the new baby. This can be an opportunity to work through these feelings – better now than as an adult!
3. Give the oldest child the opportunity to help with the new baby. This is a wonderful way to give the oldest child a feeling of belonging and significance and make them *part of* the new experience.
4. Avoid too much "oohing and ahing" over the new baby in front of the first child (I know, this is really hard), over compensating by "oohing and ahing" over the oldest child.
5. Accept that there will probably be misbehavior on the part of the older child (on of our older children would occasionally bite the new baby), and avoid over-reaction. The "mama-bear" or papa-bear"

reaction will only create a sense of disconnection and isolation for the oldest child.

6. If the older child hurts the baby, immediately check in with the older child and express empathy (e.g. "You must really be feeling sad to have hurt your sister, are you OK?"). Then check to see if the baby is OK, together. Note: this assumes that there is no serious harm to the baby, just tears or less.
7. Avoid comparing the two children, even on benign observations. This is very difficult (I make this mistake often) because the differences between children in the same family are really fascinating.

Older Children (3 and up)

1. Seek more information and understanding of birth-order to better understand the motivations of your children. "Siblings Without Rivalry" by Elaine Maslish and is a terrific resource. Getting into the world of the child helps adults react with compassion.
2. Be sure to continue as much one-on-one time with children as is possible. Appreciating the unique traits and perceptions of our children is a lifetime task.
3. Find activities that everyone can do together. Although this is difficult with younger children it is not impossible (e.g. a walk in town, ice cream, trip to the beach, bike rides with baby in the baby seat, etc.)
4. Do not take sides in arguments. Taking sides nurtures victim/bully training. Often parents assume that the oldest child is at fault and rescues the youngest. However, once this pattern is established the younger child will often initiate the conflict when the parents aren't looking. The older child reacts, and because they are bigger, stronger and more verbally able, their reactions often draw the ire of parents. They feel victimized themselves and then retaliate, with the younger child becoming the victim. Younger children find that they can gain a sense of power in being the victim if mom or dad takes their side. Children fight and argue ostensibly to pull parents into the argument. Here are some alternatives to respond to fighting or arguing:

Parent(s) simply walk away and leave the scene.

Parent(s) remove both children from the scene into separate areas. "You can come back when you are ready to work out your problem together." This is particularly appropriate for physical fights.

Parent(s) do not respond at all. They simply ignore the fighting.

I was very skeptical about these suggestions before having our second child. As a parent of four children, I can attest to the fact that they work wonderfully. Most every time the children emerge together and often times laughing. They have had the opportunity to work out their problem (even if it doesn't look like you want it to).

5. Fair doesn't mean everyone *gets* the same thing, it means that you *treat* your children the same. Fair means that everyone gets what they need!
6. Give encouragement to every child and recognize their unique gifts to the family.