

It's dinnertime at the Levy house and Dina and Yossi are counting the strands of spaghetti on their plates.

"Not fair! Not fair!" Dina yells. "Yossi got more than me."

"Did not," says Yossi. "Did too," says Dina.

"Count them. You got eleven and I only got nine," Dina says.

"That's because you ate them up, you big baby," Yossi says.

Does this sound familiar? Does it remind you of dinnertime at your house? Sibling rivalry is a fact of life. It exists in all families, to a greater or lesser degree, and has existed in human families since the beginning of time. Even fairy tales are teeming with sibling rivalry – remember the story of Cinderella?

The siblings in these stories all suffered from the jealousy, competition and fighting that goes on between brothers and sisters. There is a wide spectrum of sibling rivalry behavior that ranges from simple nit-picking and squabbling to verbal abuse and outright violence.

What causes sibling rivalry? There's a joke that goes "sibling rivalry is caused by having more than one child." Joking aside, sibling rivalry can be a serious problem and it does have some definite causes. Sibling rivalry often rears its head with the arrival of a new baby. The newborn cuts down on the firstborn child's exclusive amount of alone time with his parents. Because a new baby requires enormous amounts of time, effort, and attention, the first-born feels that suddenly his mother and parents hardly have any time to spend and play with him or her, and as a result, the firstborn feels left out and resentful.

Birth order, or a child's position in the family hierarchy, can also be a root cause of sibling rivalry. For example, the oldest child may be burdened with the responsibility of taking care of his or her younger siblings and may resent the younger siblings for having an easier time of it. On the other hand, a younger sibling may resent his older sibling for what he perceives to be preferential treatment. What parent hasn't heard a younger sibling complain, "It's not fair. Why can't I stay up until nine-thirty like Elisheva?" Older kids seem to get more privileges.

Some parenting practices actually promote competition between siblings. Sometimes a parent favors one child over another – either consciously or unconsciously. The fact is that some children are just easier and more likeable than others, or a parent identifies with a child because he or she is physically or temperamentally more like them. Some parents tend to unconsciously repeat the patterns that prevailed in the family they were raised in. For example, if a mother was a neglected middle child, she may have more empathy for her middle child than for her other children.

## Sibling Rivalry



Photo by Z. Bojman

## On Sibling Rivalry

by Bassie Morris

- ▼ Many of our children share rooms with other siblings. I would encourage mothers to label a box (a milk carton/crate is perfect) or drawer with each child's name for that child's exclusive use. Each child should have his or her own private space, even if it is just a few inches. A parent should find phrases that she feels comfortable with to help a child understand his or her place in the family, such as:
  - You are the best four-year-old in the family
  - I was so happy when you were born, and you are my best Riki, etc.
  - I have enough love for everybody
- ▼ Mothers should acknowledge feelings out loud, for example:
  - I see you are having trouble playing with...
  - It's hard to be the youngest
  - It's hard being four years old
- ▼ Sibling rivalry is normal. As each new baby is born, the child's place in the family changes so there will be constant behavioral changes. It is normal for a child to regress. Simply acknowledge the feeling out loud:
  - I see you feel like being the baby
  - I see you feel like being two years old
 But then say something like:
  - Babies are so messy. I'm glad you're four years old
  - Make a gentle joke: Everyone is making such a fuss over this little baby. She can't even do things like you.
- ▼ Treat the regression matter-of-factly, and usually it will go away. If a child insists on acting babyish, you can take away some of his or her age-appropriate privileges. The main point is, don't deny their feelings.
- ▼ Remember, you are just reducing the intensity of the fighting or feelings to a reasonable level.

### Some more hints:

- Tell stories about children who don't get along all the time but who love each other underneath.
- Remind children that they can dislike a sibling's behavior while still loving her.
- Reassure them that, "Mommy's heart stretches. The more love she gives, the more she has to give."
- Don't compare children to each other.
- Replay conflicts verbally to show children that they can find non-violent solutions to problems

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In families where there is a handicapped or otherwise challenged child, sibling rivalry is especially problematic. This is particularly true in the case of a handicapped child who requires a great deal of extra services at home and out of the house. The non-handicapped siblings of the challenged sibling are likely to be resentful of the time spent on their brother or sister and may often feel that they are receiving scant attention and that their needs are being sacrificed for the sake of their challenged sibling. In addition, the non-handicapped siblings may be struggling with guilt feelings over resenting their challenged sibling and not being as selfless and accepting as their parents unrealistically expect them to be.

Sometimes sibling rivalry comes about for trivial reasons. A child may be bored or hungry or in a bad mood and may pick on his younger sibling because he has nothing better to do. Stresses in parent's lives such as divorce, traumatic illness or unemployment can decrease the amount of attention parents give the children and increase sibling rivalry.

You might ask, if sibling rivalry is normal and unavoidable, does that mean that there's there nothing I can do? Do I have to live in a war zone until my children are grown up and out of the house? The answer is, absolutely no. There are several things that parents can do the minimize sibling rivalry.

## TIPS FOR PARENTS

**- Prepare children for the arrival of a new baby** - As arrangements are made for the arrival of a new baby, make sure these arrangements recognize the needs of the older sibling.

**- Treat each child as a unique individual** – Just because your children are all members of one family doesn't mean that they are equal and should be treated exactly the same.

**- Never compare one child with another** - Parents can intensify feelings of jealousy by holding one child up to the other. When you tell Motti, "Why can't you clean up your room like Aaron does?" all Motti hears is that you love Aaron more than him.

**- Nurture the unique qualities of each child** – Recognizing each child's different and special talent separates him from his siblings and builds up his self-esteem.

**- Spend special alone time with each child** – All children cherish alone time with their parents. Make these alone times a priority in your busy schedule.

## Health Matters

by Garey V. Ellis, M.D.

### Childhood Obesity

Childhood obesity is becoming an epidemic in the United States today. Nearly one out of every three children is overweight or obese; seventy percent of these children will grow up into obese adults. The number of overweight children in the United States has increased dramatically in recent years. Almost 8 percent of 4 and 5 year old children are overweight, nearly double that of 20 years ago. Overweight is more prevalent in girls than in boys and in older preschoolers (ages 4-5) than younger ones (ages 2-3).

Obesity increases even more as children get older. Among children from ages 6 to 11, at least one child in five is overweight. Over the last two decades, this number has increased by more than 50 percent and the number of "extremely" overweight children has nearly doubled.

Obesity is an underlying cause of a number of serious medical conditions including Type II diabetes, essential hypertension, respiratory disease, heart disease, gallbladder disease, stroke and osteoarthritis. These conditions are beginning to show up at increasingly high rates among children who are overweight. According to Dr. Howard J. Eisenson, M.D., director of the Duke Diet and Fitness Center, children are "... actually developing Type II diabetes earlier, in some cases in their teen-age years." He adds that "researchers are predicting that, instead of seeing heart disease happening in their 50s and 60s, our kids might be subject to heart disease as early as their 20s..."

Obese children are not only at risk physically but emotionally as well.

The social implications of obesity rob children of self-confidence and self-esteem. The cruel treatment that overweight children experience in school, in social activities, and on the playground can cause emotional scars that will stay with them for life.

While genes play a role in childhood obesity, genetics alone cannot account for the alarming rise in obesity rates over the past few decades. For most children - as for most adults -overweight is the result of unhealthy eating patterns: too many calories and too little physical activity. The American Obesity Association (AOA) found that nearly 30% of parents say their children eat less nutritiously than they did during their own childhood and are significantly less active.

The most important strategies that families and schools can use to prevent obesity in children are those that promote lifestyle changes. Promoting healthy eating behaviors - portion control, "real meals" and healthful snacks - as well as regular physical activity are preventative strategies that should be developed during early childhood.

Developing and maintaining a healthy lifestyle from early childhood on will improve a child's quality of life and result in a decrease in the many risk factors that are associated with childhood obesity.



*Dr. Garey Ellis is Yeled V'Yalda's Director of Health Services and Family and Community Partnerships.*

### **-Do not get involved in your children's disputes -**

Children need to learn to resolve their own conflicts

### **-Reward appropriate behavior -**

Don't just become involved when there is a problem among your children. Recognize and reward the good things that they do for one another.

### **-Seek professional help -**

If your children are fighting all the time and the fighting is out of control - if it is endangering the physical well-being or self-esteem of any member of the family, don't hesitate to consult a professional psychologist or counselor.

Sibling rivalry is not all bad. Think of it as a learning experience. Learning to deal with sibling rivalry teaches your children valuable social skills. It teaches them to control their negative impulses, to resolve conflicts peacefully, to see the value of another person's perspective, to compromise and negotiate. Sibling rivalry prepares children for the competition they will face later in their lives.

Best of all, as your children watch how you handle their squabbles justly and calmly, they are accumulating valuable parenting skills that they will be able to use when they themselves become parents.

## RESOURCES

### Books for Parents

Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish

Beyond Sibling Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Become Cooperative, Caring and Compassionate, by Peter Goldenthal

Raising Children to Care, by Miriam Adahan

### Books for Children

I Love You the Purplest, by Barbara Jooose Ages 4-9. *Two brothers compete for their mom's attention and love. She shows them she loves them for their special selves.*

Queen of the World, by Thomas Yezerski. Ages 4-9. *A realistic portrayal of three sisters' rivalries in a loving family.*

Too Big, Too Little, Just Right, by Loren Hodes *Preschool. Racheli learns that the best thing in life is to be exactly what you are...yourself!*

Big Like Me: A New Baby Story, by Ruth Finkelstein *When Mommy comes home with a new baby girl, Benny turns into a big brother.*

