Siblings Without Rivalry
How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too

Authors: Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish
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Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish are internationally acclaimed, award-winning experts on adult-child communication. Both lecture nationwide, and their group workshop programs are used by thousands of groups throughout the world to improve communication between children and adults.

How This Book Came to Be
As we were writing *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, we ran into trouble. The chapter on sibling rivalry was getting out of hand. We were only halfway through, and it was already over a hundred pages long.

To do justice to sibling rivalry, we’d have to give it a book on its own.

It also occurred to us that we had an unusual opportunity through our nationwide speaking engagements to find out what parents around the country felt about sibling problems.

In order to find out we devised a brief questionnaire.

At the same time we interviewed people personally. We taped hundreds of hours of conversations with men, women, and children of diverse backgrounds ranging in age from three to eighty-eight.

Finally we gathered together all our materials, old and new, and ran several groups of eight sessions each on sibling rivalry alone.

From all these sessions and from all the work we had done in the years before comes this book, the affirmation of our belief that we, as parents, can make a difference.

We can either intensify the competition or reduce it. We can drive hostile feelings underground or allow them to be vented safely. We can accelerate the fighting or make cooperation possible.
Brothers and Sisters—Past and Present

I secretly believed that sibling rivalry was something that happened to other people’s children.

I’d never compare, never take sides, never play favorites. If both boys knew they were loved equally, there might be a little squabble now and then, but what would they really have to fight about?

Whatever it was they found it.

From the time they opened their eyes in the morning till the time they closed them at night, they seemed committed to a single purpose —making each other miserable.

It baffled me. I had no way to account for the intensity, savagery, and never-endingness of the fighting between them.

Even now, years later, as I sit here leading my first workshop on sibling rivalry, I realize how little has changed. People can’t wait to express their dismay at the disparity between their rosy expectations and rude reality.

“As I see it,” a man commented, “the whole thing is a genetic crapshoot. If you’re lucky, you get a winning combination of kids whose personalities go well together. If not, you’re in trouble. But either way, folks, it’s out of our hands.”

“I don’t accept that it’s ‘out of our hands,’” another woman retorted. “We heard a lot of examples here today of parents who made things worse between their kids, who actually drove them apart. I joined this group because I’d like my children to be friends someday.”

Where had I heard whose words before? Aloud I said, “You remind me of me ten years ago. Only I was crazed on the subject. I was going to see to it personally that my two boys became friends. As a result I found myself on an emotional roller coaster. Everytime they played together nicely, I was elated. ‘There! They do like each other. I’m a wonderful mother.’ And everytime they fought, I would despair, ‘They hate each other, and it’s my fault!’ One of the happiest days of my life was the day I gave up the ‘good friends’ dream and replaced it with a more realistic goal.”

The woman seemed confused. “I’m not sure I know what you’re getting at,” she said.

“Instead of worrying about the boys becoming friends,” I explained, “I began to think about how to equip them with the attitudes and skills they’d need for all their caring relationships. There was so much for them to know I didn’t want them hung up all their lives on who was right and who was wrong. I wanted them to be able to move past that kind of thinking and learn how to really listen to each other, how to respect the differences between them, how to find the ways to resolve those difference. Even if their personalities were such that they never could be friends, at least they would have the power to make a friend and be a friend.”

It had taken me a long time to make peace with what I had just summed up for her so swiftly.

“There’s no mystery about what I did. Whatever skills I used, you can too,” I reassured her. “And you will, beginning next week.”

She broke into a weak smile. “I might not last till then,” she said. “What do I do in the meantime?”

I spoke to the whole group now. “Let’s use this week to observe what stirs things up between our kids. Don’t let the discord go to waste. Write down the incidents or conversations that distress you. At our next meeting we’ll share our findings and take it from there.”
Not Till the Bad Feelings Come Out . . .

The next session started unofficially as people were taking off their coats. “You know it helped to take notes while the kids were fighting,” a mother remarked. “I was so busy writing, I didn’t even get upset.”

“I wish I could say the same,” another woman commented. “By the time the week was up, I could hardly look at my oldest daughter.”

There were groans of recognition from the others who were settling into their seats.

“I don’t understand what makes some of them so mean,” another woman said. “My five-year-old will pull the baby’s hair, put his fingers up her nose, in her ears, in her eyes. The little one is lucky she’s still got eyeballs.”

I know exactly what they all were talking about, I remember my own bewilderment and rage at finding the baby with two long scratches on his back and my three-year-old standing there with an evil little grin on his face.

“It’s important to make a distinction between allowing feelings and allowing actions,” I replied. “We permit children to express all their feelings. We don’t permit them to hurt each other. Our job is to show them how to express their anger without doing damage.”

The Perils of Comparisons

So far we had been talking about the fiercely competitive feelings that children bring to the sibling relationships all by themselves, without any help from us grown-ups. I started our third session by asking the group whether they could think of any way in which we adults contributed to the competition.

Someone called out, “We compare!”

No argument there. Everyone seemed to agree that by making comparisons we definitely “heated up” the rivalry.

“It’s strange,” I told the group. “When my kids were young, I swore to myself that I would never compare them. But I did it anyway—over and over again.”
People looked at me in surprise.

“I’d hear the words coming out of my mouth,” I continued, “and be amazed that it was me speaking. Finally I figured out what was going on. I compared them when I was bursting with anger (‘Why do you always have to be the one to keep the whole family waiting? Your brother was in the car ten minutes ago!’). I also compared them when I was bursting with pleasure (‘That’s terrific! Your big brother has been working on that for an hour, and you figured it out in two minutes!’) In either case, it only led to trouble.

“Here’s what helped me break the pattern. Whenever I was tempted to compare one child to another, I would say to myself, ‘STOP! DON’T!’ Whatever you want to tell this child can be said directly, without any reference to his brother. The key word is describe. Describe what you see. Or describe what you like. Or describe what you don’t like. Or describe what needs to be done. The importing thing is to stick with the issue of this one child’s behavior. Nothing his brother is or isn’t doing has anything to do with him.”

Instead of comparing one child unfavorably to another, (“Why can’t you hang up your clothes like your brother?”) speak only about the behavior that pleases you.

✓ **Describe what you see**
  “I see you hung up your jacket.”

  OR

✓ **Describe what you feel**
  “I appreciate that. I like seeing our hallway looking neat.”

### Equal Is Less

It was our fourth session.

I told them all the story of the young wife who suddenly turned to her husband and asked, “Who do you love more? Your mother or me?” Had he answered, “I love you both the same,” he would have been in big trouble. But instead he said, “My mother is my mother. You’re the fascinating, sexy woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“To be loved equally,” I continued, “is somehow to be loved less. To be loved uniquely—for one’s own special self—is to be loved as much as we need to be loved.

“I hope,” I said, “that I’m not giving anyone here the impression that we should never give the identical item to each child. There will be times when that will be the obvious and right thing to do. All I want to point out is that if you decide not to give equally, for whatever reason, that’s all right too. The children who fail to receive won’t go under. Your understanding and acceptance of their disappointment will help them to deal with life’s inequities.”

**RESIST THE URGE TO COMPARE**

Instead of comparing one child unfavorably to another, (“Why can’t you hang up your clothes like your brother?”) speak to the child only about the behavior that displeases you.

✓ **Describe what you see**
  “I see a brand new jacket on the floor.”

  OR

✓ **Describe what you feel**
  “That bothers me.”

  OR

✓ **Describe what needs to be done**
  “This jacket belongs in the closet.”

**CHILDREN DON’T NEED TO BE TREATED EQUALLY. THEY NEED TO BE TREATED UNIQUELY.**
✓ Instead of giving equal amounts (“Here, now you have just as many grapes as your sister.”) . . . give according to individual need. (“Do you want a few grapes, or a big bunch?”)

✓ Instead of showing equal love (“I love you the same as your sister.”) . . . show the child he or she is loved uniquely. (“You are the only ‘you’ in the whole wide world. No one could ever take your place.”)

✓ Instead of giving equal time (“After I’ve spent ten minutes with your sister, I’ll spend ten minutes with you.”) . . . give time according to need. (“I know I’m spending a lot of time going over your sister’s composition. It’s important to her. As soon as I’m finished, I want to hear what’s important to you.”)

Siblings in Roles

“Now here’s what I’d like to know from you,” I said. “What do you think it is that drives some parents to assign different roles to their children?”

Their answers came quickly:

“I think we tend to project our own weaknesses onto our children. I know I’m always accusing my son of being a ‘procrastinator,’ yet I’m the world’s champion at putting things off.”

“I think we put our children in different roles because we want each of them to feel special. I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do but I tell my three, ‘You’re good in reading; your sister is good in math; and your brother is good in art.’ It’s a way of giving each of them a separate identity.”

Each account, though completely different, had the same pattern. One role seemed to determine the other: “I was always the slob; my brother was Mr. Clean.” . . . “I was the holy terror; my sister was little goody two-shoes.”

Someone asked, “Isn’t it possible to have a family where each sibling’s role somehow meshes smoothly with the others, and the whole family functions as one harmonious unit?”

“I suppose so,” I answered, “but we also need to prepare our children for life outside the family. And life demands that we assume many roles. We need to know how to care for and be cared for, how to be leaders and followers; how to be serious and a little ‘wild’; how to live with disorder and to create order. Why limit any of our children? Why not encourage all of them to take chances, explore their potential, discover strengths they never dreamed lay within them.

“It’s true, there are children who do have great natural gifts, and those gifts should certainly be recognized and encouraged. But not at the expense of the other siblings. When one child stakes out his or her area of special competence, let’s be on guard about excluding the others from that area. And let’s make sure that the others don’t exclude themselves. Let’s be wary of statements like, ‘He’s the musician in the family’ . . . ‘She’s the scholar’ . . . ‘He’s the athlete’ . . . ‘She’s the artist.’ No child should be allowed to corner the market on any area of human endeavor. We want to make it clear to each of our children that the joys of scholarship, dance, drama, poetry, sport are for everyone and not reserved for those who have a special aptitude.”

✓ Not his parents

Instead of: Johnny, did you hide your brother’s ball? Why are you always so mean?

Parent: Your brother wants his ball back.
✓ Not the child himself
Johnny: I know I’m mean.
Parent: You’re also capable of being kind.

✓ Not his brothers or sisters
Sister: Johnny, you’re mean! Daddy, he won’t lend me his Scotch tape.
Parent: Try asking him differently. You may be surprised at how generous he can be.

✓ If Johnny attacks his brother, attend to the brother without attacking Johnny
Parent: That must hurt. Let me rub it. Johnny needs to learn how to express his feelings with words, not fists!

✓ Acceptance of their frustration
“This isn’t easy. It can be frustrating.”

✓ Appreciation for what they have accomplished, however imperfect
“You got a lot closer that time.”

✓ Help in focusing on solutions
“This is tough. What do you do in a case like this?”

**Children with problems do not need to be viewed as problem children**

They do need:

“Because once you start interfering, the kids will always want to involve you.”

“And, if you always settle their arguments for them, they’ll never learn to settle things themselves.”

“So,” I said, “you all seem to agree that it’s a good idea, whenever possible, to ignore the bickering and tell yourselves that the children are having an experience in handling their disagreements.”

Then I set out to demonstrate yet another approach a parent could take.

**How to handle the fighting**

**Level I: Normal bickering**

1. Ignore it. Think about your next vacation.
2. Tell yourself the children are having an important experience in conflict resolution.

**Level II: Situation heating up. Adult intervention might be helpful.**

1. Acknowledge their anger
   “You two sound mad at each other!”

2. Reflect each child’s point of view
   “So Sara, you want to keep on holding the puppy, because he’s just settled down in your arms. And you Billy, feel you’re entitled to a turn too.”

3. Describe the problem with respect
   “That’s a tough one: Two children and only one puppy.”

4. Express confidence in the children’s ability to find their own solution
   “I have confidence that you two can work out a solution that’s fair to each of you . . . and fair to the puppy.”

5. Leave the room

**When the Kids Fight**

“What are we usually told to do when the kids fight?” I asked the group.

“Stay out of it,” several people answered almost in unison.

“What else?”

“Let them work it out themselves.”

“Why?”
Level III: Situation possibly dangerous

1. Inquire:
   “Is this a play fight or a real fight?” (Play fights are permitted. Real fights are not.)

2. Let the children know:
   “Play fighting by mutual consent only.”
   (If it’s not fun for both, it’s got to stop.)

3. Respect your feelings:
   “You may be playing, but it’s too rough for me. You need to find another activity.”

Level IV: Situation definitely dangerous! Adult intervention necessary.

1. Describe what you see.
   “I see two very angry children who are about to hurt each other.”

2. Separate the children.
   “It’s not safe to be together. We must have a cooling-off period. Quick, you to your room, and you to yours!”

We had a little trouble getting the next session off the ground. Some people were bursting to tell how differently they had handled their children’s fights.

“Last week,” I began, “the point was made that some children might have differences between them which are too difficult for them to resolve by themselves. Yet our tendency as adults is to make light of our children’s quarrels, to dismiss them as just ‘kid stuff,’ and hope that they’ll somehow blow over. But it’s important for us to be aware that some of the problems between brothers and sisters don’t ‘blow over.’ They persist and become a major source of stress and concern to the children.”

A long discussion ensued. We asked ourselves some hard questions: How could we get past our initial resistance to taking the children seriously? How could we make it possible for us to listen to them, and for them to listen to teach other?

HELPING CHILDREN RESOLVE A DIFFICULT CONFLICT

1. Call a meeting of the concerned parties and explain the purpose of the meeting. “There’s a situation in this family that’s causing unhappiness. We need to see what can be worked out to help everyone feel better.”

2. Explain the ground rules to everyone.
   “We’re calling this meeting because something is bothering Janie. First we’ll be hearing form Janie—with no interruptions. When she’s finished, we want to hear how you see things, Bill, and no one will interrupt you.”

3. Write down each child’s feelings and concerns. Read them aloud to both children to be sure you’ve understood them correctly.
   “It scares Janie when we go out. She says Bill is mean to her. Last time he turned off the TV and yanked her off the couch and hurt her arm.”

4. Allow each child time for rebuttal.
   Janie: I have a black and blue mark to prove you hurt me. And my program had only five minutes to go!
   Bill: That’s an old black and blue mark. And the program was just beginning.

5. Invite everyone to suggest as many solutions as possible. Write down all ideas without evaluating. Let the kids go first.

6. Decide upon solutions you can all live with.

7. Follow-up.
   “We’ll meet again next Sunday to see if we’re satisfied with the way things are going.”
Afterword for the New Edition

Out of the many workshops we ran following the publication of *Siblings Without Rivalry*, there came a number of new ideas and greater clarity about sole old ideas. Here’s what we felt was especially important for all parents to know:

✓ **Make sure that each child gets some time alone with you several times a week.** Johnny is less likely to pick a fight with his sister to get you to notice him if he knows there will be time set aside when he will have “just you” listening to “just him.”

✓ **When spending time with one child, don’t talk about the other.** On your shopping trip with Mary, keep the focus on Mary.

✓ **Don’t lock the children into the position in the family constellation (oldest, youngest, middle). 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.

✓ **Let each child know what it is about him that his siblings like or admire.** Very often two children will behave like sworn enemies because they’re unaware of the underlying feelings of admiration and affection that one has for the other. Just knowing about a sibling’s positive feelings can make for a dramatic shift in a relationship.

✓ **Schedule family meetings.** You wouldn’t expect your car to run without periodic refueling and maintenance, yet we expect our family unit to run without regular checkups.

There is no way that we as parents can mandate a fixed, close, loving relationship between our children. However, what we can do, with skills and goodwill, is remove the usual obstacles to sibling harmony, so that when our children are ready to reach out to one another, the road is clear.

We need to deal with our own feelings, help our children to deal with their feelings, and somehow take all the raw, angry, confusing emotions generated by sibling rivalry and use them. Yes, use them to grow into more sensitive, aware, caring human beings. Use them to learn how to live together despite deep differences.

The family is where we learn our relationship skills. And the way we relate to our children and teach them to relate to each other, even in the heat of battle, can be our permanent gift to them.

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