

Chapter 4:

Sibling rivalry



Recipe rescue:

steering sibling conflict in positive directions

Ingredients:

- Kids learning how to live with others
- Kids who are tired, hungry or seeking stimulation
- Kids who've spent too long together
- A parent who reacts to, and referees their kids' every squabble
- A parent who pays a lot of attention to the kids when they argue
- Parents who openly compare their kids
- Parents who encourage kids to compete against one another
- Kids who've learnt to manipulate their parents to get attention
- Parents who don't have a plan to deal with day to day sibling disputes

The scenarios...

Guarding the remote

The scream from the playroom cuts through the air as eight year old Patrick launches himself into the kitchen, screaming, "He hit me." Mum storms off to find eleven year old Dawson, sitting in the beanbag guarding the TV remote on his lap. Dawson shoots her a glance and says, "He snatched it from me. I had it first." Monica snaps and grabs the remote and removes the batteries from the back. "Now nobody gets the TV. The both of you can live without it for a week!" 'God knows how I'll make that work,' she thinks to herself.

Lego wars

"Dad, she's stolen the Lego from my Imperial Cruiser for her stupid Barbie house." "It's not stupid," replies Macey. "It's not your Lego," Stefan calls as he runs towards Macey's bedroom. She gives chase. "Stefan, stop," dad calls from the kitchen. Stefan quickly destroys the Barbie house as Macey tries to stop him. "Stefan, what are you doing?" dad calls as he closes in. "I'm just taking my Lego back," Stefan says with a snigger. Macey is in tears. Stefan continues. Peter finally arrives, "Stefan that was unkind." Stefan grins and is having way too much fun to stop.

An X-wing Star fighter

Caleb proudly shows his mum what he made at school. "I made it myself. I got everything from the making box. It's an X-wing Star fighter," he boasts. Eight year old Anna, Caleb's sister, snorts, "That nothing like an X-wing." Caleb's pride plummets like a pricked balloon. Mum turns on Anna, "That's mean! Who made you the expert on Star Wars anyway, young lady?" Anna, up to every challenge, bounces right back. "Mum, no one does Star Wars anymore!" Mum kneels down to sooth Caleb. "Don't worry about her. I think it's a beauty." Anna flounces out of the kitchen.

Competition between siblings has occurred since the beginning of time as kids vie for time, attention, love, resources and approval from their parents. It's not new! Time travel back to the biblical story of Cain and Abel; it tells of Cain's awful jealousy after God appeared to favour his brother. His competitiveness and jealousy eventually lead him to murder Abel. Many of Shakespeare's plays were tangled around sibling rivalry because it sets an intriguing backdrop of one-upmanship, scheming and deception. You may recall Kate and Bianca fighting bitterly in *The Taming of the Shrew* as they strived for their father's attention. Who'll ever forget the sibling rivalry on the *Simpsons* between troublemaker, Bart Simpson and his nerdy sister, Lisa? What about the ongoing rivalry in the context of healthy connections between the brothers and sisters in sitcoms as, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Frasier*, *Brothers and Sisters* and *Parenthood*?

Sibling relationships are the longest lasting and most constant intimate relationships formed by human beings - and mostly, they are driven by love. They last longer than most friendships, through the deaths of parents and beyond many, many marriages. Sharing an extended shared history from early childhood into old age is significant!

Sibling rivalry

the most incredible preparation for life

Arguments and fights between siblings are normal, even though they can be irritating. If you grew up with siblings you'd remember the annoyances; sharing bedrooms, bathrooms, shampoo, back seats in cars, television, toys, games, friends and the attention of your parents. It isn't easy; most of us have memories of frayed tempers, injustices and some favouritism.

Without realising it at the time, what you and your siblings were doing was the most incredible life preparation. In the relative safety of your own home you were practicing how to deal with highly competitive feelings; love, loyalty, anger, conflict and forgiveness. This interaction was powerful in shaping your identity; how you fitted in, how the family defined you and ultimately how you saw yourself.

The mistakes you made with your sibling(s) were an important part of the learning you took from home into your relationships with workmates, partners and your own kids.

There's good news here! The research and our experience tells us that siblings who squabbled with one another as kids likely ended up better friends as adults.

Competitive or collaborative?

Many of the upsets between siblings result from natural competitive feelings. The scene for competitive tension is set as soon as the second child arrives and the first-born is dethroned! No longer is the first child the centre of the universe. Their universe suddenly becomes a shared one, and 'number two' can easily be viewed as a threat! From the moment two kids (or more) must share, the stage is set for one of two broad cultures to emerge: a culture of competition or a culture of collaboration.

The way parents speak to kids, speak about kids, share time with them, address conflict, correct behaviour, reward, celebrate and discipline drip feeds powerful messages to kids about how they 'belong' in the family. It is us who determines whether home becomes every man for himself, or becomes a place where we lift each other up. The answers to the questions overleaf will provide some indicators about what's happening in your home.



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Sibling Culture Survey

Let's determine the sibling culture at your place. Is it competitive or collaborative?

Ratings:

1 = rarely/ no, **2** = sometimes/ a bit, **3** = frequently/ a lot, **4** = always/ yes

Record 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 next to each question and then total them up

Do your kids squabble a lot?	
Do your kids quarrel more in your company for your benefit?	
Do they argue in front of one parent more than the other?	
When you interfere in their bickering do they instantly begin to blame one another?	
Is there a big difference in the kid's behaviour when you compare how they behave at home together, to when they stay over together at a friend's or relation's home?	
Do the kids seem to get along with other kids better than they get along with each other?	
Does it feel like the kids fight all of the time?	
Do the kids constantly rub against each other so that a blow-up is never far away?	
Are you more likely to hear the kids saying unkind words to each other, like; "You're stupid", "You'll never get it", "Is that the best you can do?" "Cry baby!" or "You're such a loser?"	
Are your kids highly protective of their belongings and won't share them with one another?	
How do the kids respond when their brother or sister has a win or finds some success; are they more likely to make jealous or spiteful remarks?	
Do the kids tell you, with glee, when their brother or sister has made a mistake, or is in trouble?	
When a sibling is having a bad moment or a bad day, does the other one transform into a perfect angel?	
When one of your children has a friend over to play is the other one angling to 'take over,' 'annoy' or 'sabotage' the experience?	

Scoring guide:

Highly competitive – 45 or above

Competitive – 35 to 45

Collaborative – 25 to 35

Highly Collaborative – below 25



Total: _____

How did you go?

Is the 'sibling culture' you've created at home competitive or collaborative?

Whatever your score, don't despair. Every situation is salvageable if you want to put in the work.



As you're probably realising, you are a big part of the reason why the current culture between siblings exists. Just 'tune in' to the ideas in Recipe rescue below, and if you live with a partner, be prepared to have some conversations about forging a plan to build a healthier sibling culture. The road to better days requires a united approach. Kids, who've learned to argue, deflect responsibility and to blame brothers and sisters, know how to work the differences between the two of you. You are actually creating the wiggle room! And, if the results from the survey suggest that the sibling culture in your home is mainly collaborative, then use the Recipe rescue as a checklist to ensure sibling rivalry remains within emotionally healthy limits.

Recipe rescue:

steering sibling conflict in positive directions

Setting limits

As a parent, what can you do to ensure the rivalry between your kids stays within healthy limits?

Let the fighting between your kids run too far, too fast, too often and unchecked, and you may end up with an abusive sibling situation. This is when one child takes complete dominance over a brother or sister. 'Sibling abuse' comes in many forms; physical (repetitive pushing, punching, pinching, gouging, hitting, slapping, biting, hair pulling and choking), emotional (repetitive teasing, name calling, belittling, ridiculing, intimidating and provoking) or sexual (unwanted and inappropriate touching, indecent exposure, intercourse and rape). What an abusive sibling does to their brother or sister inside the family would be called assault outside the family. Indeed, a study by Brigham Young University professor Laura Padilla-Walker found continuing and elevated hostility between siblings is associated with greater risk of delinquency (Padilla-Walker, 2012).

On the other hand, let's not kid ourselves that competition and conflict between kids in the home shouldn't exist. Of course it does and will - our

kids are young, inexperienced and often find themselves competing for the same things because their developmental needs are so similar. It's the way it is. Our role is to monitor their state of interaction and guide them, without obsessively 'over-umpiring' their every move. Yes, there's a tricky line to be walked by parents, and those who do it reasonably well offer siblings a wonderful gift for the future.

We know from intriguing research that there are special gifts that siblings give to one another. Apparently, little sisters tend to safeguard big sisters from depression (Padilla-Walker, 2010). Believe it or not, there's something about having a little sister that makes girls in the ten to fourteen year old group less likely to feel down in the dumps! This same study found that having a loving sibling, either gender, promoted good deeds such as helping others or watching out for other kids. In fact, loving siblings foster helpful attitudes twice as effectively than loving parents can engineer. The message is to encourage sibling affection, because once they arrive at adolescence, it is a big protective factor.

Comparing kids is a disastrous practice

"I wish you'd be more like your sister/brother!"

"Your sister/brother always does it! Why can't you?"

"Mark, I wish you were more like Bill"

"You could try a bit harder and get better grades at school like Bill"

"Thank goodness I don't have to put up with this from Bill!"

Did you hear similar statements as a child from your parents? Was there a brother or sister you had to live up to? Then you don't need us to tell you how such statements discouraged you, stirred up resentment or even inspired jealousy. Comparing kids is downright harmful. It won't make one child try harder. Instead, it sets the scene for point scoring between them. Eventually, one of the kids will arrive at the conclusion, "if I can't be valued for me, then the best way to belong is to get the most attention - I can be the loudest, the most demanding, the most outspoken, the saddest or depressed."

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Take off your referee's uniform and throw away the whistle

Sometimes kids look as though they're spoiling for a fight, but this isn't the goal at all. Their aim is to generate a basic level of stimulation between one another - in a strange way they are bonding - and there's no more to it than this! The problem is that it's easy for this niggling behaviour to deteriorate into fighting.



Knowing this, parents often blow the whistle and dive headlong into umpiring simply to stop the noise and restore harmony. In reality, once we insert ourselves into the fracas, the goal immediately changes for the kids. Rather than winding one another up, or fighting for the best spot on the couch or in the car, or first on the computer, the kids forget about finding a solution. Instead, now that they have mum or dad's undivided attention. They become ruthless; shout, argue, blame, and twist events to win and prove who really is mum or dad's favourite at the time.

Consider two ideas;

1. Only get involved if your effort is part of a strategic plan.
2. Try not to look and sound overly involved when you must get involved.

So next time, as you see the kids going at one another, deliberately hold back. Step out of your umpiring uniform, throw away the whistle, observe and think far more strategically. Think; is it wiser to ignore this behaviour? Does the behaviour really matter anyway? Do I need to buy into this? If you must buy into it then calmly assert yourself;

"Hey, you two... separate! Now!"

"Hey, if you want to fight, take it outside!"

"You know this won't end well. It's time to walk away from each other!"

"It's not worth it. Someone will end up hurt."

Then, walk away and busy yourself with anything, except the kids!

If the kids momentarily stop say, *"Hey, I knew you could deal with this. I'm proud of you."* Then, return to the task you were occupied with. When they realise that you are not going to mount your steed and gallop in as the white knight of justice to solve their every dispute they'll pick up on two themes;

- You provide a very low level of attention when they fight.
- You have faith in them, and expect them to settle their own disputes.

When the kids decide to fix a row, even if the solution isn't as slick as yours, make sure you give them the attention they truly deserve, say;

"Gee, you guys are growing up. Well sorted."

"I knew you could sort that out, let's celebrate with an ice block."

"That's worth a high five you two. I'm proud of your thinking!"

"Whoa! That was a clever way to manage

your feelings."

"You both kept your cool and sorted it! Later we'll go down and hire a DVD to watch together."

"James, I like the way you decided to let Matt go first. That was a great decision and showed that you're too clever to need to win all the time!"

And, continue to check yourself with this question; 'Did praising the kids for solving the quarrel give them better quality attention than telling them off?'

What about when you must step in

Occasionally, you must step in because there's imminent danger or harm to a child. When you must step in there are some healthy ideas to keep in mind;

While we look for, and even manipulate opportunities for children to resolve their own problems, we have to be aware that developmental and temperamental differences between them can sometimes translate into massive power inequalities. One child may be physically stronger, be more reactive or aggressive, be a quicker thinker and be more adept at delivering spiteful words. And, the stronger may not necessarily be the oldest!

The real challenge here is to consistently interact with the kids

and observe how they relate with one another. The intimacy that you build is the best protective factor to guard against 'sibling abuse'. When difficulties between siblings prevent living together normally, or become harmful or dangerous, you must get involved. If you suspect that one of your children is being mistreated then take them aside. Talk privately at length, calmly and amicably. Don't try to immediately get

to the bottom of it. Instead, talk about what's happening, why it's happening, how long it's been going on, how they feel about it and what can be done to repair the relationship. Listen, and listen very well.

Next, take the other aside. Avoid blaming as this is not the time to conduct a 'witch hunt'. Be prepared to listen to them very carefully. Also be

prepared to offer authoritative leadership by bringing it to a family meeting. Try to keep everyone's dignity intact, even though mistakes may have been made. Together set new understandings and boundaries, and decide on a way to monitor and review progress. This may also involve sessions with a skilled professional to help the family remain on a healthier trajectory.

What about when one of the kids comes to you upset over a clash they've had with their brother or sister?

When six year old Mila comes running in complaining that her ten year old brother, Judd, slapped her while they were play wrestling on the trampoline, what do we suggest? We see this as a wonderful 'teachable moment' to up-skill the apparent victim. Make sure you make the most of it. We recommend handling it just like her mother does here;

Mila, I can see that you're hurt. That's a shame. You must feel awful.

No, Mila, I'm not going outside to tell Judd off. I'll deal with him later.

But, what were you thinking? You know Judd. This has happened when you've play-wrestled before and you know when he's getting angry. You know his look and the words he starts to use better than anyone else.

Staying on the trampoline with Judd, after things had gotten angry was a bad decision.

You chose to ignore what was happening.

All you needed to do was to stop and move away from him. You could have slipped quietly inside and told me what was happening. We could have found something for you to do, or for Judd to do. We could have handled it so it helped you both!

Now, let's clean up those tears. And, remember, from now on when things begin to go wrong between you and Judd be clever and quietly move away - talk to me, or dad, or do something else.

A little later, when Judd is alone Mum firmly reminds him that slapping Mila was wrong. She's not interested in rehashing the events and creating a moment where Judd feels as though he must defend himself. Instead, she's quietly assertive, expresses her disappointment and reminds Judd that he's in a family where people never hit. She's of course referring to the family mission statement. Mum then discusses positive options he will use in the future. Mum firmly emphasises that if he does this again there will be a consequence for him. Mum gets up and moves away from Judd allowing him to think without feeling threatened. Before the end of the day Mum will call Judd and Mila together with her to have a chat about what went wrong and how the problem can be fixed.



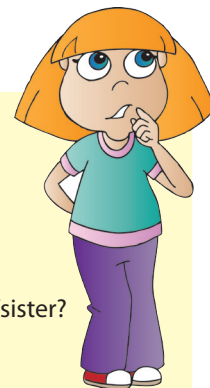
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Reflection

Reflection is a 'perfectly timed moment' you create following a sibling spat. Once they've settled, take the kids aside together (Like Mum will with Judd and Milah) or one-by-one and calmly ask them the questions opposite. Listen and resist the temptation to give them your answers or your interpretation. Allow plenty of time for them to think and respond. The act of asking these questions helps kids to develop the social/emotional problem solving parts of their brain. In addition, it gives you a revealing insight into the quality of their thinking, their capacity to learn and ability to resolve conflict.

What was the problem?
What was your part in it?
What made you decide to...?
How did you feel when...?
How do you think it was for your brother/sister?
How did you try to sort it out?
How did that work?
Do you want to be fighting?
What might fix this problem (if it's still a problem)?
What might you try next time this problem happens?
How can I help?



Modelling - they never stop watching how we do it

Is it okay for parents to argue in front of the kids?

Traditionally, the popular thinking has been that parents should take their conflicts behind closed doors, so not to scar children for life! As it turns out, hiding conflict from kids isn't healthy for them, or for parents.

Research teaches us that as long as parental bickering doesn't descend into insults, and the conflict is sorted with goodwill and affection, kids feel secure. Over time, their pro-social behaviour is likely to improve (Cummings, 1994). The important thing here is that the kids actually witness parents sorting the issue. When your kids witness you working through conflict respectfully and productively you increase the chances they will pick up these very same behaviours when they

run into problems. If, on the other hand, your kids see you regularly shout and swear at each other, slam doors and become highly emotional when you have problems, they're likely to pick up those same habits as well. Makes sense doesn't it?

Teach kids to recognise and move beyond 'sticking points'

There are times when deadlocks or 'sticking points' between siblings occur. Typically, they happen when both

How do you navigate around these 'sticking points'?

Firstly, share that these moments happen to each of us in the adult world too, and to get by, we draw on all sorts of peacemaking ways to keep the dignity of one another. Let them know that in the heat of the moment the natural tendency is to dig in, hold ground and try to win. Introduce the idea of backing-down and how to back-down. Later, when you witness one of the kids

conceding or peacemaking, praise them and tell them what they just used is flexible, friendly thinking. It shows that they are growing up, and this kind of behaviour helps to win friends!

When all else fails teach the kids how to use 'Rock Paper Scissors',

how-to 'flip a coin' and how to make deals or bargains to solve a deadlocks. Sometimes the simplest of strategies are the most effective.

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believe they are entitled to have it, have won, or to have their way. These moments are challenging and the flare ups can be truly amazing!

Spend time with each of the kids

Making one-on-one time for each of the kids is insurance that money can't buy. During these emotionally safe moments little things fall out in conversations providing you with continuing 'snapshots' of how each of the kids are feeling, coping with one another and with life.

Bet you're thinking; "how can I do this?" We understand that in a busy home this is tricky for both mums and dads. The wise word... "If you look for time to do something, you'll never find it, but if you make time, you can make it happen" certainly applies here.

Make a date with each of the kids - just once a month to spend a little time with them. If you keep a diary, put it in there as an appointment and stick to it! Treat it with the importance of a business meeting because when you weigh it up, it's actually more important! Arrange experiences with each kid that you know will be enjoyable. Slip out for a milkshake together, go shopping or for a drive, sit in the car and talk or play a game, head off to the movies, go for a picnic lunch, visit your child's favourite place, walk to the playground, hire a movie and watch it together, or take them on a 'magical mystery tour' in the car together.

American civil rights activist, Jesse Jackson, was spot on when he said, "Your children need your presence more than your presents." Having a healthy relationship helps out when our kids make mistakes or we make blunders with them. Rather than the emotional intensity skyrocketing into catastrophic proportions and everyone running for offensive or defensive positions, the problem can be solved for what it is. Yes - quality relationships deliver wonderful comprehensive insurance!

A final tip

Scottish sibling researcher, Dr. Samantha Punch (2007), interviewed ninety children aged from five to seventeen years, from thirty families of mixed socioeconomic backgrounds in central Scotland. She found that kids don't have a natural incentive to treat their siblings nicely because no matter what, their sibling will still be there tomorrow! Yet, kids are more careful when it comes to how they treat their friends, because friends may not want to be their friends if they treat them unkindly.

Dr Punch's revealing conclusions included that sibling interactions tend to consist of back stage rather than front stage performances. She raised a crucial point - no matter how much we go on and on to them about treating one another well, there's simply not a lot of internal motivation for siblings to be kind and considerate to one another. As kids compete for resources, such as knowledge, attention, love, time and space, they look to parents to lead, to set the tone and cleverly tweak expectations as they grow.

