



Worn Out By Sibling Squabbles?

BY KAY ABRAMS, PH.D.

DEAR DR. KAY,

My daughter, Angie, is just turning 8. After years of struggling with infertility, we had a second daughter, Melissa, who is now 2. Angie is too smart for her own good and very bossy. She is very dramatic and manipulative. She still has tantrums daily, has trouble falling asleep and purposely provokes us. She is mean to her sister, and this really wears us down. She manages often to get her parents fighting over how to handle her. She is enormously jealous of her sister. Having said that, she can be so sweet to all of us. Could you offer some wisdom about sibling rivalry? I spend most of my time with my girls fighting to get them to stop fighting!

DEAR PARENT,

It sounds like you are right to seek advice regarding Angie's temperament and her difficulties with self-regulation. As parents, the best we can do for our children when their behavior is immature or maladaptive is to step back and take a look at all the internal and external factors at play. External factors influencing behavior are the situation, family

dynamics or stress and social or academic demands. Internal, or inherited, factors include temperament, neurology, genetics and brain chemistry. So, it is nature and nurture, together. Your question involves family and marital dynamics, Angie's temperament and sensitivities as well as the sibling rivalry. Remember that as we grow and help our

children grow, we deal with all these issues. For now, I will respond to the rivalry question.

- Parents attempting to reduce rivalry by spacing their children out just right or by giving each child identical material goods have adopted a false idea of reality that can result in disillusionment and resentment. Rivalry is alive and well in our families, our work environment and in the world. Rivalry is essential, more fun for your kids than for you, and it is here to stay.

- Rivalry is about having influence and practicing the give-and-take of relationships. Rivalry is about vying to win attention and approval. It is through rivalry that we learn to temper our feelings of jealousy and competition. It is through rivalry that we develop identity, by differentiating ourselves as separate from, or alike, from each other. Rivalry in families is about who is allied with who, and this plays out in our social and work lives. Rivalry is always with us and challenges how we negotiate and secure our needs.

- So, for example, if you grew up being dominated by an older sibling, you may have developed behavioral persistence and

determination. Alternatively, you may feel most comfortable following those who are confident leaders. Others relish any opportunity to separate from their older siblings by pursuing endeavors that are distinctly different.

- If we understand the nature and importance of rivalry, we can be less reactive in the face of our own children's rivalry. When we are reactive and run to the rescue, and thereby ally with one or the other sibling, we run the risk of adding fuel to the flames. To further complicate matters, our children can become quite attached to pulling us in to affirm their "side" of the conflict. Inadvertently, we can find ourselves exhausted as we try to manage their rivalry, rather than facilitating and empowering them to manage their own rivalry!

- Try to remember that it is not our job to "fix it" or eliminate the conflicts. It is our job to manage rivalry, and that could mean anything from saying, "Take it outside," to ignoring the conflict, letting the children learn from the dynamics. Take care to verbalize where you set the bar, such as, "There is no hitting in this family," or "Use your words if you are angry." And, definitely take the time often to be present, acknowledge their

anger, reflect upon both sides and facilitate win-win solutions. In this manner, you repeatedly teach mutual respect along with problem-solving skills. This can even be done, after they have played out their conflict, to the point they feel regret.

- Children who are not yet verbally fluent require what I call "physical parenting." That means, yes, you need to be physically present to manage the rivalry and model the win-win solutions.

- DO NOT REACT WITH DRAMA. Your drama makes the rivalry all the more exciting and relentless. Now the rivalry is about getting a reaction out of mom or dad. Reactivity is reinforcing.

- Rivalry can stem from kinds of dynamics that deserve attention, and in this manner, rivalry is our red flag for growth or change. This means communicating and activating change, rather than lecturing, nagging or scolding which is not constructive. So, for example, if you recognize that Angie likes to take a bite out of Melissa's donut in order to provoke Melissa when you turn your back, and she does such things all day long,

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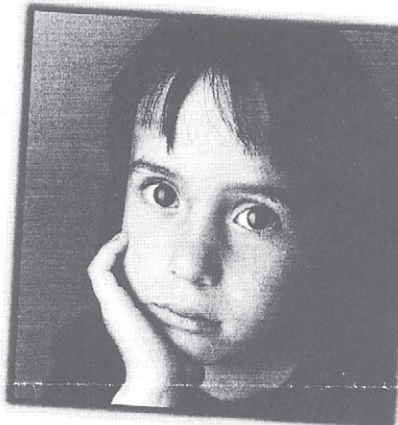


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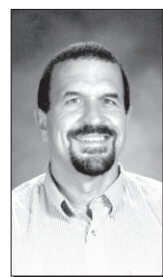
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you know that it is about her jealousy and her wish to win your attention. If all you focus on are the ends, such as how to “consequence,” you may not ever impact the behavior.

- Work from several angles. Make certain each parent has time with Angie, separate from her little sister. Make sure that Angie has important responsibilities and privileges as the older sibling. This is more effective than words of praise. Mastery, rather than praise alone, engenders efficacy and esteem. Mastery is the key to maturity. Give Angie jobs, not only to be the “little mommy,” which may backfire on you. She can stay up a bit later and help care for the dog, frost a cake, etc. Opportunities for recognition and affirmation will come from these endeavors, rather than from negative acting out. If you must proceed with a consequence, do so very matter-of-factly, without reactivity. Add plenty of ignoring to diminish the negative provocations as means for affirmation.

- It is better to act on moving forward and better to specify what you expect rather than to harp on the negative behavior, which gives it power. So, for example, Angie pours sand in Melissa's hair while in the sandbox. Rather than scolding and reacting to the ploy, simply divert attention and get in there to direct a game or move forward: “So, let's get all the cups and pour sand into the dump truck. Angie, you know how to make those molds for the pyramids, so you could make some over here.” It is not always necessary to focus on giving attention to the misdemeanor, thereby adding fuel to the flames of rivalry.

- When an inappropriate behavior cannot be ignored or diverted, use few words and be clear, such as “Time to move out of the box, Angie...we'll see you in a few minutes when you are ready to make the right choices about how to play with sand.” “La-dee-da,” I call it. Very matter of fact. And what if she refuses and screams? You are in charge and confident, never flustered or reactive. Now it is time to say, “Looks like you cannot leave

the sandbox...do I need to take you out, or can you take yourself?" And, because now Angie may have secured a way to keep you locked in a power struggle, you can diminish this by carrying on with play, even if you have to move out. Don't forget to say, "Looks like we have to move, but we will wait for you when you are ready."

- Always "hold up the mirror," using language that is about their choice, and drop a positive hypnotic suggestion when you decide to come back for a teaching opportunity: "Looks like you need to scream, and I cannot help you right now. When you calm down, we'll play some more. I'll be over by the swing set." When your child recovers, there is no need for dramatic praise, just let her bring herself back; this is intrinsically reinforcing and satisfying. We want to avoid dramatic kiss-and-make up cycles. The goal is to diminish and eliminate the negative cycles of provocation, escalation and subsequent inappropriate forms of power and gratification.

In closing, I invite you to look at an article or listen to a CD about rivalry by going to www.kayabrams.com, and clicking on articles/resources. Also, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish published a fabulous practical book about how to manage rivalry, *Siblings without Rivalry*. Just remember that while that title sells well, rivalry does not go away. Children, and even adults, experience rivalry. It is integral to how we learn to negotiate our differences. The goal is to accept and understand rivalry in order to better manage our needs for influence and affirmation. ■

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Montgomery County. Her mission is to bring psychology to the community through writing and public speaking. Please join "Dr. Kay" for her monthly "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse every second Wednesday of the month. Log onto www.kayabrams.com for more information and to register.

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