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SIBLING RIVALRY: A CLOSER LOOK

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In researching the material on the relationship of siblings, particularly in the early years, one is struck with the handling of this problem rather superficially or as “frequently occurring” and having “always existed,” citing the biblical story of Cain and Abel as evidence. Neither approach appears particularly helpful to a mother or father struggling to contain their feelings. They usually direct their feelings against the older of the siblings, often the first-born, feelings more of disappointment and surprise than anger, particularly if the child seemed to have been ready to welcome the newcomer.

However, particularly having lost mother’s lap for a long time, the seeds for competition and resentment have already been sown. If a same-sex playmate was expected and a different-looking creature comes home from the hospital, parents and grandparents have to handle the situation tactfully. Remember the newborn was already part of the family for nine months. Thoughts of how he or she will look, what name shall be given to this growing threat to my position in the family, one similar to mine or a quite different one.

There are other issues within the family system which influence the feelings of the sibling once the baby is brought home. Extended family can play an important role at this time. The first boy, the first girl, the first redhead just like Uncle Joe. The older sibling all of a sudden says “my name is ugly – why can’t I be Tim or Betty? Grandma picked that name extra special for you.”

We need to recognize that being second or third or fifth in the family means a loss to the other one, two or four. Rather than even gently saying, “You always wanted a sister, didn’t you? Yes, in theory, but now that she has really arrived, it is all of a sudden quite different. Think of the second wife – even in polygamous families, many a tear is shed in solitary darkness. Competition is hard to take at any age.

Babies need a lot of attention during the first years – they need to be nourished, held, rocked, comforted when wet or hungry. Toileting problems frequently appear during the first months in siblings, even a five-year-old, when mom or dad diapers the new arrival. Punishment is not helpful. The reminder that big boys use the bathroom won’t do the trick. Talking about it during a walk in the park might help.

In summary, then, sibling rivalry does occur almost always early after birth, and sometimes even before. It needs to be recognized as such, not belittled, not overlooked, not made fun of, not punished, but handled thoughtfully by both parents, discussed lovingly, and kept in mind as a developmental step to be handled as uncritically as possible with honesty and openness. We teach competitiveness at a later time to our children. Let’s start early by recognizing that we all want our place in the sun.

Sibling rivalry in older children is even harder for parents to see as such and to understand and handle. Do not handicap them by trying to be the referee, Permit children to solve their problems even if you have to leave the room – it will come in handy later.