

## Parenting – Sibling rivalry

What is sibling rivalry?

Sibling rivalry is a competition among siblings in a variety of things including, but not limited to, parental attention or to strive better using the other as a yardstick.

Children may say things like “you love brother/sister more than me” and “I can’t do as well as my brother/sister” to their parents. Sometimes, they do not say it but show it. For instance, they may do a lot of things like trying to participate in many different activities to gain their parents’ attention. For the younger ones, they may bring their art pieces to show their parents or tell them things that they did in school that can gain their parents’ approval and attention.

What are some myths about sibling rivalry that can be debunked?

Contrary to some people’s opinions, competition between siblings is not totally bad. It stems from our basic survival instinct where, just like animals who need to suckle more to grow big and strong, children need attention from parents to know how to manage the challenges in life.

Competing against their own sibling gives children a good platform to learn many things. When handled properly, the parents are able to inculcate different strengths in children such as how to focus on what they are good at and learning how to feel secure with people.

However, if mishandled, these children may grow up feeling that they are not as good and that they are always having to catch up with others. Later in their life, at the workplace, even though they are good workers, they may not have good interpersonal relationships with their colleagues.

How does sibling rivalry change as children grow older?

For younger children, when there are new additional member in the family, many would feel that they have their attention taken away from them. This is because children are more concrete and they are at the stage where their whole world is centered on them. These children would try to gain their parents’ attention when they are taking care of the younger ones. The children may also develop behavioural issues when they want attention. These behavioural issues are maladaptive methods of handling with the situation. Parents need to address these issues immediately and if unable to, they are encouraged to seek help from professionals.

At The Therapy Room, a team of experienced psychologists – led by Geraldine Tan, the principal psychologist – has worked with numerous children with behavioural issues.

Should you have any concerns or inquiries, please feel free to click [here](#) to contact us and find out more.

Older children such as pre-adolescents or adolescents tend to fare better with the new additional family member. They are moving into the stage of wanting to explore their own identities and are moving out of the wings of the parents. They would be more receptive to the new family member and most would be glad that they have responsibilities as they can feel that they are the older one in the family.

Is there a difference between how a female and male child will deal with sibling rivalry?

There may not be a noticeable difference in the different genders but there could be a difference in handling of the feelings in different children, regardless of gender. Some may handle their feelings in an aggressive way while some may handle it in a passive manner.

Each children may act in different ways. For instance, some children may act out, some may bully the younger one, some may complain to their parents about their other sibling to get them into trouble and others may turn it inwards and feel inferior. As a result, they try to achieve many things in order to win approval.

At The Therapy Room, our team of psychologists, led by Geraldine Tan, the principle psychologist, conducts play therapy which focuses on using play to understand and communicate with children their feelings, behaviours and thoughts. Should you have any concerns or inquiries, please feel free to click [here](#) and contact us to find out more.

What can parents do to prevent/minimise sibling rivalry?

Sometimes, as parents, we may favour one child more than the others which could exacerbate the sibling rivalry. However, it is important to remember that every child is unique and each of them has different strengths and weaknesses. For instance, some children are academically inclined and some excel in other aspects such as sports, arts or music. Nevertheless, we all have expectations as parents and have different needs for each individual. This is normal for everyone. As a result, we may tend to reciprocate the affection of the child who meets our expectations and needs.

As a parent, we need to reflect on what our likes and dislikes are. Our preferences may play a part in our feeling frustrated and even helpless when dealing with our children. For example, there was a case where a father reacted differently to his daughter and son when they cried. When his daughter cried, he compelled to do something for her because the father thought, "crying is what girls do". Yet when his son cried, the father felt anger. In this situation, the father's beliefs affected his perception of how different genders should react. However, this does not mean that he loves his son any less.

When we feel frustrated and angry about certain issues as a parent, we need to introspect and ask ourselves why we are actually feeling and thinking that way about the particular issue. For example, if the child does not do well in a test or examination and we get upset, we can ask ourselves, “Are we nursing our own fear of failure?”. If the child is whining and screaming, we can ask ourselves, “Are we feeling helpless and a lack of control?” Once we are able to identify our feelings and put them aside, we can open ourselves to the children’s world and better aid them their life’s journey.

Children have their own lovable points, thus, we are encouraged to focus on their points while trying to identify our emotions. By doing so, parents will be able to love their children without favouring one of the children. This would prevent and minimize the sibling rivalry between children as they will see that their parents love them for their own uniqueness.

At The Therapy Room, a team of psychologists –led by Geraldine Tan, the principal psychologist –is experienced in working with parents through many different therapeutic interventions. In addition, The Therapy Room also conducts parenting workshops and programs. For more information, please [click](#) here for the upcoming parenting programs. Should you have any concerns or inquiries, please feel free to click [here](#) to contact us and find out more.

What are the ways parents can help a child cope with sibling rivalry?

Parents can ensure that each child has individual time and family time with the parents. This helps them learn that they are loved as an individual. As a result, they are able to open themselves to be more aware of how to interact adaptively with the sibling when parents are around rather than competing all the time.

Parents can also:

- Acknowledge each child’s strength.
- Not compare them.
- Acknowledge the jealousy in a child.
- Show the child that the fear is unfounded as no matter what, they will still love him.

It is important to remember that there is no yardstick to measure love. It is not by how long a child can sit down or how many marks they get.

Below is an examples of how parents can cope with sibling rivalry.

There are some older children who would say “you love brother or sister more than me” to their parents. Often at times, as the older sibling they are given the responsibility to set a good example and be the sensible one. This is common among the Asian culture. However, the older children will then notice that the younger sibling will be excused

when they do something wrong because they are still young. The older children may conclude that with the younger sibling around, they obtain more scolding and pinpointing than before. They may become very frustrated and feel that growing up is not fun. Some children may regress and act younger than their age, others may conduct negative behaviours to rebel.

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How should parents prepare their child for the new arrival of another family member?

There are several methods that parents can use. As a young child is very concrete, ample concrete preparation is vital. Although the child may see their mothers pregnant, he is not able to conceptualise that the big tummy would soon become an interactive human that would take time away from him. Therefore, parents can show lots of stories and pictures of babies to the child to prepare him.

Another method parents can use is to get the older child to buy a new toy for the new member. In addition, parents can buy a new toy for the older child saying it's from the new baby too. Another good way is to allocate a time for the child every day and keep to the time after the baby is born. This allows the older child to have his time with mummy and daddy and he does not have to compete with the sibling who would definitely take attention from the parents.

If the siblings are sharing a room, parents can have the child rearrange his room and prepare the younger sibling's space. It is important for parents to note that the child can also decorate his own space and not just the younger's one so that the child does not feel neglected. Parents can allow him to pick his new furnitures. All in all, it is important for the parents to make sure that the child feels important in helping to choose for the younger sibling's things.

What are the effects of not handling sibling rivalry properly?

There is no perfect method to handle sibling rivalry. It depends on a child's personality, the issues and the dynamics in the family. However, parents are discouraged to put down or chide the child that is feeling affected by the new member. This reinforces his idea that the new member's arrival has taken away the love from his parents. The child may even learnt to assume that he would only get negative attention such as scolding.

When sibling rivalry is handled properly, the competition becomes a healthy one and aids him in his interpersonal skills rather than being maladaptive or stressful.