

Who's competing for what between rival siblings?

By TERRY TEMPLEMAN, Ph.D.

Sibling rivalry is common in all cultures. Although it often produces strong emotions for children and parents alike, one way parents can reduce their anxiety about it is to look at it from a practical standpoint.

Sibling rivalry occurs when children compete with each other for resources that parents control. Some of these resources meet physical needs and comfort, such as food, clothing, privacy, transportation, and access to toys or entertainment. Some are personal needs such as attention, approval, and affection. When there are many children and only one or two parents the competition for those resources can be intense. Children of different ages also have different

wants and needs, and it is often the children who are close in age that develop the greatest rivalry. Competition can also intensify when parents' time at home is limited, such as occurs when they have busy jobs that often keep them away.

Siblings develop various strategies for getting their wants and needs met. Being cute, witty, helpful, cheerful, smart, or affectionate generally elicits more giving from parents. Some children are better at these strategies than others, resulting in kids who feel neglected or deprived of attention. These "last place" children may resort to acting-out behaviors, figuring that negative attention is better than no attention at all.

Children also compete for the



Strategies

attention of the parent who has the resource they most want. For example, they may compete for affection and caring from the parent who best displays these qualities but compete for permission to do something from the parent who has the most authority to grant requests.

Punishing sibling rivalry generally doesn't work. Parents will have more control over the situation if they take the time to examine what resources and whose resources the children are competing for, then brainstorm ideas for allocating those resources in a more equitable manner. It's also useful to remember that competition among children is not necessarily a bad thing. Learning how to compete might even help them be more successful once they grow up and leave home.

Dr. Terry Templeman is a psychologist with Psychological Services of Pendleton.

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