

## Siblings - rivalry and jealousy

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The feeling or experience of jealousy is something that is quite often encountered in psychotherapy. Not uncommonly clients will complain of such a thing especially when they are discussing their early family of origin. Indeed in group therapy jealousy can become quite obvious as the various group members can get jealous and competitive of other group members. In their minds the therapy group begins to represent the family of origin with the therapist being the parent and the group members being the siblings. Then the original family dynamics get played out once again in the group setting.



What is being presented here is that jealousy and sibling rivalry are normal emotions for children to experience during childhood. In contrast to this much of the psychological literature on jealousy presents it as a bad emotion that needs to be avoided. Indeed envy is counted as one of the seven deadly sins and of course envy and jealousy are largely interchangeable terms. There are many

program and techniques which describe how to overcome your jealousy and descriptions of how parents can seek to avoid their children becoming jealous. To my mind this is erroneous and misses the significant psychological growth that can be gained from jealousy.

### Theories of sibling rivalry

Various explanations for jealousy and sibling rivalry have been given over the years. A common one is that jealousy exists because the child perceives a lack of available strokes (attention) or that there are a finite number of strokes in the family. The child perceives that mother can only give out say 100 units of positive attention per day. If this child sees her sister getting strokes from mother then that is seen as taking away the possible strokes that she can get that day. Hence there will be jealousy and competitiveness.

Another theory or explanation is that jealousy is what's called a complex emotion. It is not a single emotion but a combination of two emotions. First it involves a fear of abandonment which is combined with an anger at being rejected. So jealousy involves anxiety and anger mixed up together. If mother is giving attention to one sibling then the other child mistakenly perceives an abandonment by mother and also an anger at the perceived rejection by mother.

These are two common explanations for jealousy and sibling rivalry. I personally find them both dodgy at best and thus provide an alternative explanation. Firstly, both explanations above rest on the assumption that the jealous child is misperceiving mother, her actions and what is happening in the family. The first thing I do with the client who presents with jealousy as a problem is to make this assessment. Is there a misperception or not?

Sometimes parents do favour one child over another. At times their actions show that blatantly and obviously. In this case the 'unfavoured' child will have a natural jealous reaction to mother's actions and relationship with the favoured sibling. This would then be a natural Free Child reaction of jealousy. It is not a Conforming Child or pathological reaction by the jealous person. It is an appropriate response to the circumstances and not a misperception.

People who grow up in such an 'unfair' family environment often present jealousy as a problem in counselling. The treatment of the person is a two part process.

1. The person in some way approaches mother and expresses their views and concerns. The mother may be unaware that she is doing such a thing or that her actions are being perceived that way. Sometimes the mother accepts the view given and modifies her behaviour.

2. If the mother does not accept that she is favouring the other child or that there is anything wrong with such favouritism then the client needs to seek another solution. Basically that means the client accepting that mother will not change, that she will continue to display such favouritism and coming to some emotional resolution about that. In some cases it means accepting that mother loves the favoured child more than them. Not an easy thing to come to terms with but sometimes it is the reality.

Another explanation for jealousy especially when there is excessive sibling rivalry is that it results from displaced anger. In this case the children are angry at the parents for some reason but they discover that it is not safe to show such anger at the parents. The consequences of showing the anger to the parents are considered too risky and thus the anger at them does not get expressed or released.

Well that is not actually true as the anger does get expressed but it is displaced onto a safe 'object' which is commonly a sibling. So the jealousy and angst felt and displayed between two siblings can be displaced anger felt towards the parents but is displayed towards the safer person.



Jealousy is a part of normal human development.

Finally and most importantly jealousy and sibling rivalry can be an attempt by the child to resolve its primary narcissism. Any student of developmental psychology knows this is a very important developmental task for any child to achieve. The resolution of its primary narcissism.

Primary narcissism, as distinct from secondary narcissism, is the state of mind that a child has from birth up to 5 years of age. It perceives itself to be the centre of the universe, omnipotent and all valuable. The child believes it is more important than others, that it is special and that it should get favourable treatment.

This attitude is meant to decline as the child learns that it is not the centre of the universe and there are others on the planet that are of equal value and importance. Realising the importance of others reduces primary narcissism.

For example in a family of three children each child will discover over time that the parents by and large treat each of them equally (ie not as the extra special one). So it is the other siblings that makes the child realise its narcissistic view of the world is inaccurate. The other siblings frustrate the child in its desire to be special and unique and discover that it is only as important as others are.

Thus one can see that jealousy and sibling rivalry are one key part to achieving that developmental task of moving past the state of primary narcissism. Parents are given multiple opportunities when sibling rivalry is being displayed to assist the child to move beyond its sense of primary narcissism. For some unknown reason they rarely do.

Instead of seizing the moment one hears most parents say things like, "Oh the kids are just fighting" or "The kids are just being kids". This is very surprising as it is such a discount of the value and psychological importance that jealousy can play in a child's psychological development.



Sibling rivalry

### The absence of sibling rivalry

When there is little sibling rivalry that usually means the older child has tended to take the parental role with the younger sibling. Thus the older one has put his/her needs second to the younger sibling and thus there is reduction in competing needs. Often this situation is manufactured by the parents and the older one acts as a sort of a live-in nanny. So in this way these family dynamics would be seen as pathological or not what is meant to happen normal human development. For instance the younger child will tend to have life long problems with its primary narcissism because it never had to deal with its jealousy feelings to the older sibling

However I am being somewhat pedantic on this point. As long as the roles the siblings take on are not too extreme then it is by and large OK. Younger siblings tend to be more child like and more demanding of their needs than older ones who tend to be more 'parental' like. If the siblings are not very locked into these positions or roles then that seems fairly normal and average.

### Siblings and natural talent

Of course all children are different and they each have their different personalities. They also have different natural levels of abilities and talents in a whole variety of ways. Sometimes this can lead to very difficult parenting circumstances.

What happens when you have two children who are quite different in their natural abilities and talents? When one child has considerable natural talent in school work, sport, socially or otherwise and the other sibling has either average or below average talent. This creates quite a difficult domestic situation for all concerned.

It is bad enough when the more talented child is the older sibling but the potential damage is magnified more so when the younger sibling is the more talented one. Right at the moment I know people in my personal life who have this scenario and I also have some clients where in one instance the younger sibling is much more naturally talented in the three areas of school work, sport and socially. In another case there are two children who are twins where one is also more naturally talented. As a result he seems to breeze through life whilst his sister struggles much more.

A very difficult situation for the parents indeed. They will tend to not want the older less talented child to feel bad, so parents can easily down play the successes of the younger more talented child. However that is not fair to that child as they deserve all the praise and encouragement for their success so they can go on and achieve their fullest potential in life.

Such praise of course highlights to the other sibling that they are not getting the same success in life. If they are the older child then that is made even worse if the younger sibling actually 'beats' the older one in what ever area that maybe. This makes it very easy for the less talented sibling to just give up and stop trying at all. "If I don't try and succeed then my younger sibling can never be shown to beat me".

I know in the case of the twins, the parents have them at the same school but different class rooms so as to avoid the inevitable comparisons that will be made. This is one suggestion often made to parents in such circumstances - avoid making comparisons. Whilst good advice, the children will inevitably make their own comparisons as will their peers and others at school like teachers. This can be made worse if the younger more talented one uses such comparisons as a way to antagonise the older sibling in the inevitable sibling rivalry that occurs.

The worse case scenario is if the less talented child not only gives up but makes the decision "If I can't be good at being good then I will be good at being bad". This is not an uncommon scenario in the histories of drug abusers and those in the prison population. Those situations where the drug user is seen as the black sheep of the family can include this decision. I have also seen similar situations of what is some times referred to as the 'Negative narcissism'. Narcissism is usually defined in terms of the person who strives to achieve greatness or fantasies of achieving great success. Thus they are noticed and get lots of attention from others. The high profile criminal achieves the same. They can get considerable attention for being as bad as they can and a large amount of time, effort and money is spent dealing with them. Such as in the penal and legal systems.

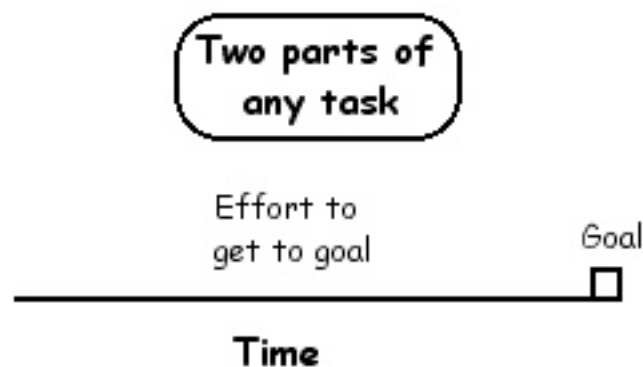


The less talented child can just give up trying ("thus I cannot be beaten") or may decide to be recognised for being bad. I know of one family situation where the older less talented sibling moved geographically away from the family and took up a completely different life style and career. To my mind this was at least partly due to the fact that his younger much more talented sibling left him with only that option, (in his mind).

A child's sense of worth will inevitably be eroded if, at least in their own mind, they are not winning as much as they are meant to through childhood. If one is living in close quarters with the more talented sibling it will be in the child's face all the time in the most formative years of their life. Unfortunately there is very little else the parents can do except to avoid comparisons, give the less talented one lots of love and strokes and so forth.

There is one other piece of advice that can be given to parents in such a situation. Whilst recognising results the parents can also focus on the effort put in. Thus one can give the less talented child lots of praise for the effort they put in. One needs to be careful with this as it can easily give quite a different message to the child.

There is an old saying: What you stroke is what you get  
Consider this diagram.



It shows that there are two parts to any task whether that be completing an assignment, running a race or building a model aeroplane. Firstly one must put in the effort to complete the task. Once done the task is complete the person has reached their goal.

The question at hand for the child is what does the parent give the most attention for? Is it for the effort they put in to complete the task or is it for basking in the success of completing the task. At times one hears parents say, "Son it does not matter if you win or lose as long as you try your hardest".

What does this say to the child? It says that the first part of the task - effort to get to the goal - gets lots of attention and reaching the actual goal is of less importance. What you stroke is what you get.

The child is getting all the strokes or attention for trying to get to the goal and not for achieving the goal. When this person grows up they get what is called a Try Hard driver. They put all their effort into trying to achieve the goal and when they actually achieve it, it is sort of an anti climax. It has little psychological meaning because it's not what the parents gave all the attention for.

So the person spends their life putting in lots of effort and struggle to get to their goals and once they get there they lose interest or it has little importance to them. So they quit and move to another goal and then set about doing exactly the same again. In essence life ends up being one struggle after another with little appreciation or basking in the good feelings of achieving the goal.

There is one other point that merits mentioning and it should be noted that I am mentioning it at the end of the article. This article about problems for the less talented sibling. One rarely, if ever reads articles about problems for the more talented sibling in the professional literature.

One could assume that most parents will think, "The talented one has the talent already so he will survive or get through OK anyway". Or parents could even think, "It's not fair, so the talented one can achieve a little bit less for the sake of the less talented one".

Is it not the birth right of every child to be afforded the maximum parental encouragement and assistance such that they can achieve their full potential? It seems safe to say that some if not most talented siblings will be damaged by the domestic situation of having a less talented sibling. The parents will not as openly or enthusiastically encourage and support the talented sibling in its pursuits when such family dynamics apply.

Indeed a similar situation applies when there is one child in the family who has significant intellectual and physical disabilities. One can find numerous articles on how to help the disabled child but it is rare to read articles on the damage that can be caused to the other non-disabled siblings in the family.