

Lesson 9: Sibling Rivalry

Whenever there are two or more children in a family, rivalry between them is inevitable. Jealousy is a very common trait in human beings. People look at the successes of others and react in one of two ways. Some wish to achieve the same and thus try to work for it, harboring no ill-feelings or grudge. Others however, wish to despoil the good fortune they see.

Their nature is such that they cannot bear to see the success of others, and hope for its destruction. This is the type of jealousy that is so strongly condemned in Islam. Says the Holy Prophet (S): *Beware of jealousy; for jealousy eats good deeds the way fire eats wood.*

It is not abnormal for children to feel jealous of one another. The aim of parents should be to control it and keep it within appropriate limits. It cannot be totally eliminated. When confronted with the achievement of a sibling, many children perceive it as a threat. They are afraid of losing their status. Success of a sibling could result in unfavorable comparisons, greater expectations and lower respect for themselves, both at home and outside. Although this could be entirely imaginary and blown out of proportion, it is necessary to understand why children react as they do.

Most sibling rivalry stems from the perceived loss of parental love and respect. Children wish to have the greatest share of their parents love and attention. When siblings take it away from them, even temporarily, it becomes greatly upsetting. Only time and maturity helps the child understand that this loss is only imagined and not real.

An important point to consider is that it is sometimes possible for a parent to love one child more than another. It could be because of certain qualities the child possesses. The parent has to be very careful, however, not to display this inclination. It could result in greater jealousy. In the story of Prophet Yusuf (a), the Holy Qur'an gives us an example of sibling rivalry. T

he brothers of Prophet Yusuf (a) thought their father loved him more than he loved them. Some commentators of the Qur'an mention that Prophet Ya'qub had a special affection for Yusuf, and perhaps gave him more attention. That could have been because he was one of the youngest sons, or because his mother had passed away. Perhaps Prophet Ya'qub foresaw the great future of Prophet Yusuf.

Whatever the reason, the brothers of Yusuf felt threatened and resorted to throwing him in the well.

The Holy Prophet (S) always emphasized that children should be treated equally. The sixth Imam (a) is reported to have said that he felt more inclined towards some of his children, but he purposely displayed more affection to the others.

Causes of Jealousy

Position in danger

When a new baby is born in the family, the child who was the youngest (or the only one) feels threatened. He is accustomed to being the center of attention and now has to contend with someone who takes away the parent's love and attention. This is especially true of younger children who cannot understand that the parents have enough love for all their children. The demands of a new-born are often misunderstood. In such a situation the feeling of sibling rivalry can be reduced through the following ways.

- a) Talk to the child before the baby arrives. Prepare him and involve him in the preparations for the new arrival. It could become a very exciting event if handled properly. The child will begin to feel attached to the baby before it comes, and will await the arrival anxiously.
- b) When the baby arrives, involve the child as much as possible. He could carry out minor chores according to his age, such as bringing diapers, holding the towel, etc. The feeling of being a big brother or sister creates a sense of importance and makes the loss of position more bearable. The child is now evolving towards a higher status and must be taught to appreciate that.
- c) Talk to the child constantly. Discuss the baby with the sibling/s. Talk about his waking up at night, his crying, his babyish gestures etc. Keeping communication open with the children assures them of the love of the parents.

Comparing

All human beings (and children) have different abilities and personalities. A variety of characters and traits in a family make the home a lively and interesting place. Many parents, however, make the mistake of constantly comparing children with one another. Although the intent is to try and make one child imitate the good behavior of another, the result is often resentment and jealousy.

Comparison lowers the self-esteem of children, especially when one child is always at a disadvantage. Sometimes children are given labels. So one may be "lazy", another "smart", another "slow" etc. Such labels, especially if given constantly, eventually become accepted and believed. A "slow" child comes to believe that he is slow and may never wholly overcome it.

At times parents compare their children to those of other families. It is all right to sometimes mention the good qualities of another child, but it must be done gently and carefully. It is wrong to praise other children and lower one's own, especially if this is done constantly.

Giving more attention to one child

Sometimes a child needs more attention than others. This could be true of small babies, or if a child is sick and/or has a particular problem. When a parent gives continuous attention to one child, it is natural that the others feel resentful and jealous. The first thing to do is ascertain that the child receiving more attention actually needs it. Some children just demand more.

If it is a genuine need, it must be explained to the other children. Just discussing it with them, and talking about why more attention is given to the sibling may help in preventing anger and jealousy. It is also necessary to find some time to spend alone with each child. This is hard to do when parents are very busy, but an effort must be made. A small amount of time spent alone with one child could make a great difference in bolstering his confidence and security.

Finding faults in the presence of other siblings

Parents who often put down and scold one child in front of another, are increasing sibling rivalry. No child likes to feel humiliated in front of his siblings. The harsh words spoken by the parent, even if deserved, could be used by siblings to tease the child. Although it is natural to sometimes get angry with one child in front of the others, a serious reprimand should be given in private. It is also important not to take sides in quarrels between siblings. A hasty reaction made in anger could be an unfair. It is best to listen to both sides and then deal with it.

Gender differences

Some parents prefer their sons over their daughters. This is a totally unfounded and un-Islamic bias. To favor boys and give them special treatment is unfair. It builds great resentment among siblings. Some parents give a lot of freedom to their boys, and have too many restrictions for their daughters. Although it is necessary to protect the girls, it is not wise to allow boys too much freedom. In today's society both need to be protected and guided.

Hints for reducing Sibling Rivalry

1. Deal with Justice. Justice does not mean the same treatment for everyone. It has been defined by as placing a thing in its place. Differences in treatment to children will exist because of age differences. A five-year old and a teenager will not have the same bedtime. Nor will both of them receive the same type of clothing or toys. Justice means to treat each child with appropriate respect and consideration. When differences are present, explain to the child the reasons and assure them that they too will receive

the same treatment when appropriate.

2. If a child displays jealousy toward another sibling, Parents should not become shocked and try to suppress it. No parent can force a child to love his sibling, or threaten him if he shows signs of jealousy. If that is done, the child may learn only that he should not display his jealousy in front of the parent. He may carry the feeling with him for a long time. Today there are many adults who hold grudges against their siblings. To avoid that, parents should try and deal with it in the initial stages. Patience and understanding are required, especially for the very young who sometimes show even violent signs of jealousy.

Although conflict and constant bickering is very common in children, most people grow out of it. Many siblings grow up to be very close to each other even if they may be physically miles apart. Sibling rivalry is a source of great concern to many parents, and many wonder in frustration if their children will ever get along with one another. However this can be overcome with some wisdom and tact and a lot of patience. Eventually the bond between siblings becomes, for most people, stronger than many other bonds.

Wise Words

1. Treat your children equally when giving them presents.

Holy Prophet (S)

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