

Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

Dealing With Sibling Rivalry

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I. Biblical References

So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Gen. 27:41).

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. "Here comes that dreamer!" they said to each other. "Come now, let's kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we'll see what comes of his dreams" (Gen. 37:17-20).

II. Introduction

The rage seen in the Genesis twenty-seven text (above) was a direct result of a Mom and Dad playing off different pages. Isaac, the father, favored their son Esau. Rebecca, the mother, favored their son Jacob. The two kids were a product of this power struggle and it nearly cost one of them his life. The entire story is found in Genesis chapters 27 and 28, and is worth reading if you've never read it.

The rage seen in the Genesis thirty-seven text (above) was the result of Dad (Jacob) favoring one of his sons (Joseph) above the other 11 brothers. The sibling rivalry between Joseph and his brothers was so fierce that they mugged him, then sold him into slavery, and told their father he'd been killed by a lion.

Although these two biblical situations are exceptional in their intensity, it's normal for siblings to express frustrations with one another from time to time. Kids generally don't have the maturity of adults, so when one child is playing with a toy and the other wants it, conflict often erupts. When one child wishes to watch TV cartoons and the other wishes to watch a favorite video, conflict often results. It's normal.

However, when families have frequent and repetitive conflict ~ when the emotional atmosphere of the home is primarily sour, harsh, fearful, angry, mean, etc. ~ then two things are probably true of that family system. **First**, Mom and Dad probably don't have their act together ~ they're not playing off the same page and are probably involved in some level of power struggle. And **second**, the children very likely exist in a conflicted environment between themselves ~ they

probably fight a lot, or else remain emotionally far from each other ~ they probably run power plays on each other ~ they may dislike each other ~ they may have a generally negative attachment with one another ~ sibling rivalry is more the rule than the exception.

One often finds a few generalized issues underlying this kind of family system. Here are five of them. **Favor:** Who gets Mom's and Dad's favor, and how do we go about getting it?

Power: Who's the authority in the home, who sets the rules, and how effectively are they enforced? **Values:** What are the values of the home ~ what is elevated as being important?

Relationships: What sort of emotional tone do Mom and Dad set in the home ~ how do they relate to one another and to their children? **Skills:** When emotions spill over, how are they handled? When someone is emotionally hurt, do Mom or Dad step in to help restore relationships? What skills do kids learn in their homes?

This chapter is about helping kids learn how to resolve conflicts.

III. Components of Sibling Rivalry

It's always dangerous to try to reduce subject matter as complex as sibling rivalry into "five principles," or five *anything* for that matter. Yet there are some issues worth understanding, and some skills worth learning. So for what it's worth, here are five important things for parents to understand and use when their kids are at one another's throats.

A. Favor

Everyone wants to know that they are loved and affirmed. **Two of the most devastating clinical issues haunting people throughout their lives are rejection and abandonment.** **Rejection** is the negative experience of having someone upon whom one is emotionally dependent, turn their backs in disfavor. **Abandonment** is the negative experience of being left alone in the universe. Human beings will do almost anything, including destroying themselves, in order to gain love and affirmation from those who are significant in their lives. The heart's hope is always to avoid the devastation of rejection and abandonment.

If you are a parent reading this right now, pause and ask yourself, How do I go about giving my favor to my spouse? How do I give my favor to my children? Your love and affirmation are enormously powerful and will have long-lasting impact. How do you go about expressing your favor? If you have sons, how do you pass along your approval of his moving from childhood into manhood? If you have daughters, how do you pass along....