

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 your approval of her emerging into womanhood?"

The story of Joseph referred to in Section I of this chapter, begins with a Dad (Jacob), giving greater favor to a son (Joseph) than to the other siblings. Here's the story.

Gen 37:2-4 ~ "This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. Now (Jacob) loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him."

During Joseph's early years he was "the favored child." Being labeled "favored child" is not always a happy thing. It played havoc with Joseph's early character formation. He became a tattletale ~ and there's hardly anything more annoying than a tattletale. It's like sand in one's teeth. One can hear Joseph running to his father and saying, "Daddy, Reuben twisted the cat's tail." Nobody ~ neither parents nor children ~ enjoys being around a tattletale. However, parents often miss the reasons why kids become snitches.

First, being a snitch often gains a certain amount of favor for the child. Joseph was playing the "good boy" role, while rotten tail-twisting Reuben was being a "bad boy." It made sense in Joseph's immature mind that his Dad would give greater favor to the one who best played the "good boy" role, so he constantly snitched. As you read this, pause for a moment and consider the effect of Mom or Dad giving a "role" or a "label" to one child or another. Whether a child is "the good little boy," or the "really bad kid" ~ whether they're the "super aggressive type" or the "poor little victim" type, *when kids are assigned roles by their parents, it affects the entire family system.*

Back to Joseph and his "favored child" role. Remember, the objective of snitching is to gain favor, and children will do almost anything to gain their parents' favor, including doing self-destructive things.

Joseph's Dad undoubtedly encouraged Joseph's snitching. Parents often encourage tattletales. If they have a child prone to getting into trouble, and another child wishing to please them, Moms and Dads often actually empower the "good" child to tell them if the "bad" child is doing something wrong. If you recall the family roles mentioned a previous chapter, when one child is valued as a snitch, then Mom and Dad are setting up the ground rules for the snitch to function as the family "hero" and the one being snitched on, as being the family "black sheep."

If left untended, differing sibling roles can create sibling rivalry. For example, one kid gets parental attention by being "a good little boy." Another kid gets parental attention by being "a poor victim." Yet another kid gets parental attention by being "a thoroughly rotten little rat." Each kid in this sort of family system, has his or her own avenues for obtaining parental attention. One does it by being good; another by being bad; another by

being a victim. This sets the kids up against one another as competitors for parental attention. Joseph's brothers hated him. Joseph's father apparently valued his being a tattletale. It nearly cost Joseph his life.

A very basic question in the hearts of all children is, "How do I obtain my parents' favor?" It's not a question that kids cognitively verbalize, but it's a basic question of all childhood. When a little child says, "Look at me Mommy..." it's a request for parental favor. Even the role of the tattletale is an attempt at gaining parental favor. So again we ask, how do you bestow favor upon your kids? How do you convince your children that they are loveable and capable? If you are experiencing a lot of sibling rivalry in your home, a question to ask yourself is whether you are perhaps reinforcing any competing roles in your kids? What do your kids have to do in order to gain your favor?

Ten Minute Reflection

How was favor handed out in your family-of-origin? Who got the most favor? How did they do it? Who got the least favor? Why did they get the least? What emotions did favor-granting or favor-withholding evoke in family members?

B. Power

The greatest negative force driving human beings is arguably the desire for power. In the Garden of Eden, power was offered as *the lure* to lead Adam and Eve into disobedience against God. Satan said, "***You will be like God....***" (*Gen. 3:5*). In our normal human state, we all find that desire lurking in the recesses of our hearts. The two-year-old child, decompressing and screaming as he writhes on the floor, is expressing his inborn desire for power. It may be frustration about not being allowed to have a cookie before supper, or it might be that his mommy told him it's time for a nap and he doesn't want to go to bed ~ but it's about him not getting his way ~ i.e., it's about power. Our quest for power begins in the early years of our lives. It is then carried into our early primary relationships, with our parents and our siblings.

Let's use the example of Joseph's being a tattletale to explore the issue of power. There's definitely a power play within the role of the tattletale. Joseph gained power over his brothers by snitching. Each time Joseph successfully snitched on his siblings, it reinforced the fact that at least for the moment, Dad was on Joseph's side and scolded the rotten Reuben for twisting the cat's tail. For the moment Joseph was Jacob's "hero" child and rotten Reuben was the "black sheep." (Obviously I'm speaking metaphorically here ~ we don't know much at all about Reuben and he was probably a nice person.)

Putting this into systems language, for the moment, Joseph had either been invited into, or had manipulated his way into the Executive Sub-system (or the Parental Sub-system) as he joined with Mom and Dad against his brothers. For the moment, Joseph had been allowed by his parents to function within as a "quasi-parent," as Joseph played the role of

the “good child” at his brothers’ expense. For the moment, Joseph could “be like God....”

Here’s something for you to ponder if you’re a parent: Joseph’s daddy allowed triangling. Jacob was willing to triangle with Joseph against the other kids. This triangling momentarily put Joseph in the position of being more powerful than he would normally have been if Jacob had not triangled with him. And it was this uneven power advantage that Joseph enjoyed, that evoked murderous rage in the other kids. That is to say, it’s though enough just being a kid and trying to figure out how to get along with one’s siblings. But when one of the siblings is given an uneven, unfair, and inappropriate advantage by being invited momentarily into the Executive Sub-system, then family dynamics often really get whacked out.

Sibling rivalry can be a complex power game. There are a couple of levels for parents to ponder when dealing with sibling rivalry. At one level it’s about simple, raw, selfish, personal power as one child dominates another child ~ “Give me that toy because I’m stronger than you.” “If you don’t let me have your cookie I’ll hit you and make you cry.” At this level, basic selfishness and immaturity are at work.

At another level, sibling rivalry is often about peer-level triangling ~ forming a three-way relationship where there ought to be a two-way relationship. Perhaps an example might help. Billy wants to play with the shiny red truck, but his older brother Chuck is playing with it. So Billy invites his friend, Robby, to help him overpower Chuck. They do so, and now Billy has the truck. That’s a triangle. Triangles are all about power.

When a child learns to triangle in order to win, the next step is to transfer the learning to their peer relationships, and attempt to control friends through triangling with other friends ~ but it’s still about power.

At yet another level, sibling rivalry is sometimes about child-parent triangling. This was the case with Joseph and his Dad. When this happens, adults give some of their own authority to one of their kids as they’re drawn into a triangle against another of their kids. Kids are often masterful at drawing parents to side with them against their siblings ~ and it’s still about power.

Obviously, Jacob’s allowing Joseph to function as a tattletale set his brothers up for revenge. “Someday,” they would mutter under their breath ~ “Someday he’ll pay,” and his brothers waited for the moment that they would get even with snotty-nosed little Joseph for being the one who got all dad’s favor and who was allowed to function as a quasi-parent. “Someday.”

Ten Minute Reflection

In your family-of-origin, how were lines of authority established and enforced? Who was powerful, who was not? Which of the kids were powerful, which were not? How were

power-issues played out within the self-identities of the children? Was there one sibling who was consistently dominant? Was there one who consistently lost? Was there one who usually played the role of mediator?

How did Mom and Dad deal with sibling rivalry? Did either Mom or Dad triangulate with one of the kids? If either Mom or Dad died, or divorced, did one of the kids step up into the Executive Subsystem? If so, how did that seem to work for the rest of the siblings?

C. Values

There's a tale of a family who'd taken in their Grandfather. Grandmother was dead and Grandfather was losing his ability to do normal things, so he came to live with his daughter, her husband and young son. Grandpa was getting clumsy in his old age, and would bump into things as he walked, or spill things when he ate meals. One day he spilled his soup. Mom was angry ~ this was the third bowl of soup the old man had spilled in the last month! She blew up, and put Grandpa's soup into the dog's dish on the floor. Then she told him that because he was such a clumsy oaf, from that moment forward he would be eating all his meals on his hands and knees, from the dog's dish. Four-year-old Jimmy was quietly watching the situation. Later that day he asked, "Mommy, how old will you be when I have to put your food in the dog's dish?"

We learn our first "values" lessons from our parents. For better or worse, they are our first role models. Their values and relationships control the emotional climate of the home. So if there is a lot of strife in the form of sibling rivalry in the home, the first place to seek resolution is in Mom's and Dad's values and relationships. Is one child valued above another? Is one child's athletic, academic, or musical ability, valued above the abilities of other children? Is one child better looking than another? Or more pleasing?

Values are formed within the context of relationships. Research has demonstrated that if a child is emotionally/relationally disconnected from parents during his/her first few years, that child will have a difficult time establishing and maintaining a moral system. Emotionally and relationally disconnected children are forced to learn how to function for themselves, making their own rules, surviving however they may. Within such a context there is little motivation to adopt anyone else's morality or values. Why would Billy adopt Mom's values, if Mom clearly and openly lavished all her affection upon Billy's brother, Jimmy? Perhaps when he's young, Billy may try to adopt Mom's value in order to please her. But if he reaches the point of understanding he can never please her as much as Jimmy can, then Billy is likely to cast off Mom's entire value system.

It is through Mom's and Dad's relationships with their children that the kids learn to value and appropriate Mom's and Dad's value system. This is actually a frightening bit of research, because in today's culture ~ with our fast pace and emotionally distant family systems ~ we're raising a generation of children who are critically disconnected from their parents. Hence, we may expect a generation with limited understanding of, and

appreciation for, traditional values. One therapist said, “We’re raising a generation of assassins.” By that he meant that we’re raising a generation of people who are so emotionally disconnected from loving relationships, that they have no ability to form values. Therefore, they are willing to even commit murder if it appears to get them closer to their own objectives. Can you see how parents’ relationships with their children, affect sibling rivalry issues?

In this chapter we’re studying sibling conflict. Although kids will normally have occasional conflicts with one another, family systems in which children are consistently at one another’s throats often reflect systems in which the values of cooperation, peace and respect are not being transmitted to the children. So it’s very appropriate for Mom and Dad to ask themselves, “How are we teaching our kids to get along? How are we teaching our kids to work through conflict? How are we teaching our kids to value what Mom and Dad value?”

Ten Minute Reflection

In your family-of-origin how did your Mom and Dad transmit the values of kids getting along with one another? Did any actual teaching occur, or was peace maintained basically through Mom’s and Dad’s use of force? When sibling rivalry broke into open conflict, what happened?

Skill Builder

When kids are scrapping with one another, parents may safely assume there are probably power issues. When kids come to Mom and Dad and ask them to resolve the conflict, it’s often an attempt at triangling with Mom and Dad in order to gain power. The last thing kids want at this moment, is to be required to sit down and talk things through. But it can be one of the most effective things a parent can do. There’s much to be said for a parent saying to siblings in conflict, “OK, you two need to sit on the sofa together for a half hour and talk this through. If you can work things out in that time, then you can get off the couch at the end of a half hour. If you can’t, then I’ll add another half hour ~ but I expect you to talk things through and come to a solution. When you come to a solution, call me and I’ll come listen to it, and see if you have truly resolved the problem yourselves.”

D. Relationships

As we’ve seen already in this book, the overall relational climate of the home is the primary responsibility of Mom and Dad. If there is lingering or ongoing relational tension, then Mom and Dad need to step in and help resolve it. By the time a kid reaches late grade-school years they ought to have (and need to have) have fairly well-developed relational skills, including a set of conflict-resolution skills. Without these skills, they’re likely to begin drifting toward the “fringes” of their peer group.

And from early years, a child learns his/her relational skills from Mom and Dad. So if a kid is bombing in relationships, Mom and Dad need to look into the mirror and ask themselves, “What are we doing here? How are we teaching our kid? What skills does our child need, that they don’t have?”

If a child is unable due to physical circumstances or self-identity issues, to form peer relationships then Mom and Dad need to engineer situations in which the child can make and play with friends. For example, if a child is home schooled, parents should orchestrate activities involving peer-age friendships for their children. This may occur outside the home ~ e.g., at church, in community sports, music, dance, or other activities ~ or inside the home ~ e.g., having friends over to play. Normal socialization provides important skill-building for later use as adults. Kids who don’t learn how to have positive relationships often find themselves either isolated from life, or else in conflict with life, when they become adults.

The older a child becomes, the more necessary it is for them to have skills in working through conflicts and maintaining relationships in spite of occasional disagreements. Children who are unable to do so are often the ones in the principal’s office, or the juvenile court system, or later in the adult court system.

All people need to learn how to apply conflict management skills within real relationships. *The objective of conflict resolution is having positive and healthy relationships.* And the best, safest, most loving place to learn these skills is in the home. After kids leave home the conflict resolution process gets harder to learn. So parents, work seriously at teaching your kids how to process through conflicts. Be the example for your kids. Teach your kids how to disagree respectfully and yet part company as friends.

IV. Four Basic Skills

Here are three skills to help children learn to work through conflicts.

A. Name your emotions. If a parent wishes to process through some emotionally loaded issue, then the very emotions that everyone may wish to hide and lock away, need to be invited in, made welcome, and treated with respect. Parents teach their kids how to express emotions, by expressing their own emotions. For example, if a parent is angry, they need to say, “I’m angry.” If a parent is sad, they need to say, “I’m sad.” If a parent is frightened, they need to say, “I’m scared.” It sounds so elementary, and yet many adults are clueless when attempting to help their children understand what they’re feeling. This is why parents often blow up and do their own adult “acting out.” It’s because they didn’t learn to name their own emotions. Their kids didn’t know Dad was getting angry, until he exploded. The kids didn’t know Mom was sad or frightened, until she burst into tears. Give emotions a name. Name your emotions.

As you teach your children to name their emotions, teach them to avoid shifting responsibility for their emotions onto anyone else. To say, “I’m sad,” gives helpful information to those around you. But to say, “I’m sad because you....,” changes the entire dynamic. “I’m sad about not playing with that toy,” is OK. “I’m sad because you are a jerk and won’t let me play with that toy” shifts the focus of responsibility for one’s emotions onto the other person, and rather than solving problems, that creates further problems.

Shifting responsibility for our emotions onto someone else, elevates conflict. It makes the other person defensive. It makes us feel like we’re a victim, and as a victim it’s always easier to retaliate in order to even the score. While there are genuine moments in which a child has been victimized by another child, more often than not conflicts (i.e., sibling rivalry) is a product of two children.

Let’s talk about the role of the victim for a moment. One of the most frequent cop-outs that people use in order to shield their own emotions, and to shift responsibility onto the other party, is to play the role of the victim. Victims get sympathy. Victims aren’t responsible. Victims have been unfairly treated. Victims deserve recompense. Yet most of the time being a victim is a choice ~ it’s a product of a decision the person made. People made decisions that place them in harm’s way, or in conflict, or that place themselves at a disadvantage.

So if your child frequently plays the victim role, then your job is to help your child stop thinking and functioning like a victim. Because in the end, nobody really likes people who become expert at manipulating others by playing the victim role. And it all begins with accepting responsibility for one’s own emotions and naming the emotions, by saying things like, “I’m feeling angry,” or “I’m feeling sad,” or whatever. But not saying, “I’m angry because you....” The moment we add “because you,” the equation has changed from expressing an emotion, to an attempt at power and control.

B. Scale the emotions. How strong are the emotions? Put them into a matrix of one-to-ten, one being low and ten being high. E.g., “On a scale of one-to-ten, I’m angry at about level eight.” You might not be able to teach your three-year-old to use a one-to-ten scaling matrix, but you might be able to teach your child to use three levels of scaling ~ 1) a little bit angry; 2) angry; 3) really angry. The parenting objective is to teach your kids how to identify both the emotion they’re feeling, and the strength of that emotion.

Scaling our emotions not only helps us communicate more effectively. It helps you better understand what you might do for yourself in order to manage your own emotions. It also helps those around you understand the strength of emotion you’re experiencing. Those are important skills to use when in conflict. And although the idea of managing their emotions might not sink in right away with the children, after Mom has said about 800 times, “If you’re at a 9 or 10 with your brother right now, what do you need to do to take

care of yourself?” a child might learn to say, “I think I need to play in another room for a few minutes until I cool down to a 3 or 4.”

We may believe we function at a purely cognitive level, but in reality our emotions dictate much of our attitude, perception and behavior. Immature people tend to use their emotions to control others. Mature people tend to use their emotions to help regulate themselves. Immature people tend to use emotional thinking. Mature people tend to use logical thinking. And scaling one’s emotions is a step toward maturity.

C. Identify emotions when they’re small. Conflicts often erupt because we haven’t paid attention to our emotions until the emotions have become so intense that we can’t control them. We’ve ignored our emotions until the kettle is boiling, and now “cooling down” will take some time. This dynamic is seen in the mother who screams at her kids, “You kids make me sorry I ever became a mother!” or the child blowing up at his brother, saying “You always get to watch what you want on TV ~ you’re a selfish jerk!”

So it can be helpful to teach children how to identify their emotions when the emotions are small and more easily controlled or redirected. Rather than allowing the emotional environment in the home to become so emotionally charged that there’s little chance for resolution, it is in everyone’s best interest for Mom and Dad to help everyone in the home process their emotional stuff *when the emotions are small*. Teach yourself, and your children, to say things like, “I’m getting a little frustrated here ~ we need to talk this out,” so that nobody needs to explode in order to be heard.

D. Turn emotions into positive actions. Emotionally conflicted or immature people tend to turn strong emotions into negative behavior. Mature, healthy people tend to turn strong emotions into positive, goal-directed behavior. Some years ago the news media reported a story of a female U.S. Astronaut drove from Texas to Florida, apparently in order to either beat up or kill another woman whom she saw as a love-rival for a man. This is an example of strong emotion being turned into negative behavior. This Astronaut’s career is now over. Her rank of captain in the Navy was stripped away. Her career with NASA was finished.

What could she have done differently? As she sat in jail, those thoughts were certainly on her mind. Apparently her own marriage had ended in separation a few months before, and her husband was now out of the picture. So one can imagine there was a lot of emotional stuff pounding around in her head already. Then, somewhere along the way she “fell in love” with another man. She then *displaced her anger* by blaming another woman for loving the same man that she loved. Her emotions went from, “I’m sad about my life,” or, “I’m sad about my marriage,” to “I’m sad because....” “I’m sad because this other woman is too close to the man I love. I’m sad because she is taking this man away from me. I’m angry because she is more loved than I am.” As her sadness became anger and then rage, her actions became negative.

When dealing with a child's big emotions, the parenting objective is to teach the child how to turn those emotions into positive, goal directed behavior. If this Astronaut's Daddy had been able, he might have encouraged his daughter to write her emotions into a journal ~ or spend an hour in prayer every day ~ or go for a 10 mile run ~ or to turn her emotions into positive hard work with NASA ~ or to get onto some anti-depressant medication for a few weeks ~ or to work with a pastor or therapist in order to get to the bottom of these big feelings. Any of those activities would have been positive and probably helpful. And that is the objective of parenting when one's children face big emotions ~ parents need to help their kids **a)** process, express, and understand the emotions as much as possible, and **b)** turn the emotional energy into positive, goal directed behavior.

A brief look at anger may be helpful here. Anger is like a tooth. To help yourself understand this concept, in the space below we've provided pictures of two teeth.

Behold The Tooth



Figure 1

The Crown: The top part (white part) of a tooth is called the “crown.” In these pictures (above), write the word “anger” on the crown. Just as the crown of a tooth is the part you see when looking into a person's mouth, so “anger” is the part you often see when looking into a person's emotions. It's the emotion that people often show.

The Roots: But teeth have roots, and so does anger. The roots of anger are usually a combination of one or more of the following: *Fear, sadness, loss, or pain*. So now wrote those four words in the margin, and then draw an arrow from those words, to the root of the teeth in the picture.

Now you have a diagram that may help you understand more about anger. Let's apply this to the Astronaut. Her sadness and loss were expressed as anger, which became elevated to rage. What everyone saw on national TV, was her rage. That's the crown of the tooth ~ that's what people often see. However, what fed the rage were "root" issues such as her sadness and loss of love from her own failed marriage, the pain experienced through loneliness and rejection, and the fear of being unloved, or of being alone. Then add the projected loss of love in her fantasized relationship with her "new man." One "sees" her anger ~ but the roots beneath the anger were fear, sadness, loss and pain.

Personal Introspective Exercises

1. Write one short example of a situation in which you experienced anger. Then write a few thoughts about the "roots" underneath your anger. Was there a root of sadness? Of fear? Of loss? Of pain? Write about which of these "roots" fed your anger.
2. Then write a few thoughts about what might have been different if you could have talked about the roots of your anger, rather than allowing them to turn into anger.

1.

2.

Ten Minute Reflection

1. You have two children who seem to have a fight each night at bedtime. Sometimes the fight is about which bedtime story to read. Sometimes it's about who wears which pajamas. When they fight, they usually come to you as a parent, asking you to agree with them and disagree with their sibling. What skills from this lesson may be helpful in resolving this repetitive conflict?
2. Your younger child says, "You always give my older brother everything he wants, but you never give me anything. You love him more than you love me." What have you learned from this lesson that might help you respond more intelligently to your child's

complaint? What does this child's statement have to do with sibling rivalry?

3. One of your children comes to you crying hot tears of rage. What have you learned from this lesson, that might help you better understand what the rage is all about, and therefore how to help your child?

V. Managing Levels of Conflict

It can be helpful for parents to identify different levels of conflict, and then tie specific actions to each level. In this way parents can avoid using a howitzer to kill a gnat, and also avoid treating a cancer as if it were a mosquito bite. Here are four levels, with skills for each level.

A. Normal bickering. All kids are going to occasionally bicker with each other. Normal bickering can be identified as small and occasional disagreements or power struggles that soon resolve themselves and go away.

Skill: Silently pray for the kids. When your kids are doing what you would define as “normal bickering,” after praying for them, ignore the bickering ~ think about something happy. Go to another room and let them solve their own problems.

B. Small conflicts. When apparent conflicts erupt, you might need to interrupt them so they don't grow into larger conflicts. There's no formula for helping you determine the difference between normal bickering and small conflicts. But there is a difference.

Skills: 1) Pray for God's wisdom for yourself.

2) Ask the kids if this is a “play fight” or if it's real.

3) If it's a “play fight,” remind them that it's only “play” if both kids are enjoying it.

4) If it's a real fight, ask if the kids need your help to solve the problem.

5) If they say “No,” remind them that you don't want this to elevate into a bigger problem, and that you expect them to solve it.

6) If they say, “Yes,” then take a few minutes and help them work things through.

7) Express your expectation that the kids will resolve this conflict by themselves in the future, and express your confidence in them that they can do it.

C. Serious conflicts. A serious conflict involves a situation in which both sides are genuinely emotionally roused and going after each other. It's no longer a “play fight.” This is now a fight. It may be physical or verbal, but it's identifiable by its intensity.

Skills: 1) Pray for God's wisdom for yourself.

2) Stop any hurtful behavior. If one child is hurting another, assert

- parental control to the level needed to momentarily restore order.
- 3) Express what you see. E.g., “I see two kids having a fight over a toy.” or, “I see two kids being mean to each other.”
 - 4) Get the feelings into the open. E.g., “I see Billy crying, and he seems to be angry. I see Chris angry, red-faced and pouting.”
 - 5) Seek each child’s side of the story. Listen to each one. Their stories probably won’t be the same and you might not be able to tell which version has more truth to it. Yet you may be able to help them solve the problem, because simply listening can often allow combative sides express what they could not do without a third-party intervention.
 - 6) Ask if the two can continue being together without further fighting. If they say, “Yes,” great. If they say, “No,” then separate them and give them specific things to do that will keep them apart for a while.
 - 7) State your expectations. E.g., “I expect you to be able to handle this problem in the future.”
 - 8) State your belief in them. E.g., “I know you both have the ability to resolve this sort of problem. I’d like to see you come up with mature solutions next time.”

D. Dangerous conflicts. Sometimes children become completely emotionally out of control and are willing to do serious damage to one another. This level of conflict requires forceful and immediate parental action.

- Skills:**
- 1) Pray for God’s wisdom for yourself.
 - 2) Immediately stop any hurtful behavior.
 - 3) Separate the combatants.
 - 4) Establish yourself as the authority in the situation.
 - 5) Use a “time-out” for cooling down. Require both combatants to sit in a chair in separate rooms for 15 minutes, to allow their emotions to subside.
 - 6) If there has already been injury, focus your first attention upon the injured party.
 - 7) Seek information from both sides. If the information is not consistent, then sit the combatants in the same room and let them discuss their differences until they can give a consistent story. If they have to sit for a half hour, or even an hour before they get their stories straight, it’s time well spent for everyone.
 - 8) Require that both sides assume responsibility for their actions. One of the best skills a parent can teach their child, is to understand what the child did to exacerbate the conflict.
 - 9) Provide firm boundaries if this (or any other dangerous) conflict erupts again:
 - a) Let them know that if you have to intervene, your solution will probably be something that neither of them may have chosen.
 - b) Be very clear about the consequences for continued problem behavior.

- 10) If married and living together, let your spouse know all about this situation so he/she can support you and can join you in supervising. If divorced but somewhat friendly with your ex-spouse, let him/her know about the situation so your ex can become intelligently involved in this parenting challenge.

Ten Minute Reflection

Billy and Sam just got into a huge fight. Sam used Billy's favorite sweater without asking, and then spilled cherry juice on it. When he found out about it Billy yelled, "I'm going to rip your head off." When Mom entered the room, Billy had Sam in a head-lock, Sam was screaming in pain. The two other children, Sally and Chris, are ticked off at Sam because he called them "stupid idiots" when they told Billy about Sam's spilling cherry juice on the sweater, so they're chanting, "Kill him, Billy. Kill him, Billy."

1. Is this bickering, small conflict, serious conflict, or dangerous conflict?
2. Name and scale (1-10) the emotions you're seeing in this situation.
3. What immediate parental action is needed?
4. What short and medium-range actions should you take as a parent?

VI. Other Conflict-Management Skills

Helping kids work through conflicts can be a daunting task. Here are a few more skills to practice. Incidentally, these skills work just as well with adults as with children. You might practice them within your marriage as well as within your parenting.

A. Avoid attacking. When conflicts arise, people's emotions are probably aroused and it may seem a quick solution to attack and correct the party who appears to be the problem. However, attacking often serves to escalate the emotional environment, and it tends to build walls rather than create solutions. As a parent, you want to teach your kids how to solve problems. That's the goal. So focus your attention upon resolving the problem rather than upon attacking the person causing the problem (or the one perceived to be the source of the problem).

B. Use words. An important parenting task, and one of the key goals for problem resolution, involves teaching kids to use words rather than using hurtful actions such as hitting, screaming, throwing things, name calling, etc. Requiring that kids sit down and talk things through, leads toward understanding each others' perspective and toward problem resolution. Usually, that is THE VERY LAST thing kids want to do. Most of the time, kids want their parents to triangle with them against their sibling rival. Indeed, my own children tell me that the very worst punishment we ever gave them, was the requirement that they sit down on the same couch, and talk with each other, and come

to some common understandings all by themselves. They said they'd have much rather simply had a spanking. As a parent, you may have to repeat the instruction many times, but the parenting objective is to teach your children how to use words rather than acting out their emotions.

C. Avoid making comparisons. Billy isn't Sam. Sally isn't Chris. It doesn't help reduce anxiety for a parent to say, "Billy, you should be more like Sam," or "Sally, you need to act more like Chris." Elevating one child's behavior above another child's, is to invite sibling hatred. If you're going to use examples for children to copy, use examples outside the sibling sub-system. Using examples can be a good thing in that it helps provide children with a model. Just be careful to avoid making comparisons within the sibling sub-system, because that sets up resentment rather than solving conflict. In the Bible story in Genesis 37, for their Dad to have said, "Reuben, you need to be more like Joseph," would have even further sealed Joseph's fate.

D. Use "time-outs." If the conflict is serious or dangerous, a fifteen-minute "time-out" can be useful for cooling down. During this "time-out" encourage the kids to ponder what happened, how the conflict began, what the emotions are, how strong the emotions are, and what role they personally played in the problem. Immature behavior almost always puts the blame onto the other person, so you may have to insist that each person consider only what they brought to this conflict.

E. Require "win/win" solutions. This paradigm has been presented elsewhere in this book, but it's a terrific objective to establish in conflict resolution. If one party leaves the situation feeling they have been taken advantage of, that person will likely "lay in the weeds" looking for the next opportunity to get even. Win/win solutions have the advantage of drawing both parties into problem resolution, and fosters both parties supporting the solution.

F. Guide behavior by creating options. We're all prone to jumping toward one solution ~ i.e., the best solution according to what we wish. It can be helpful to lead all parties in a discussion of options ~ perhaps even requiring that each person come up with two or three options to help resolve any conflict. This gets people thinking "outside the box," helping people see other alternatives that broaden the discussion. Before making a decision about a solution, it can be helpful to seek multiple potential solutions, and then pick and choose parts from these varied solutions rather than just laying one on the table and requiring everyone to agree with it.

G. Review the "house rules." From time to time we all need a "refresher course" in what's expected of us. The parenting objective is not to always use your power to force calm in your home, but to use your adult skills and position to teach your children how to live successfully with each other. This includes your kids learning how to resolve their own conflicts. If you end up resolving all their conflicts for them, you may teach them **a)** that they are not capable of resolving their own problems and **b)**

how to triangle with others in order to escalate power and win. So from time to time, provide reminders of the “house rules.” E.g., “In this house we talk things through rather than scream at each other.” “In this house we take a ‘time out’ when we’re about to blow up.” “In this house we tell the truth, even if it makes us look bad.”

H. Challenge repetitive roles. Family systems that live in frequent conflict, often create “roles” into which all parties become locked. Examples of these roles have already been mentioned in this book ~ the Hero, the Black Sheep or Scapegoat, the Rebel, the Lost Child ~ others include the Aggressor ~ the Victim. When you see these sorts of roles forming, challenge them. Be on the lookout for roles becoming hardened into identities. When you see a negative role being played out, look for the opposite trait in the child and point it out. For example, if a child continually acts out the Black Sheep role, then look for times when he/she does the right or good thing, and comment on it. You can guide your children’s identities simply by pointing out ways in which they are being successful. This is an effective way to break negative roles, and it can help reduce conflict in the home.

H. Focus on strengths. There’s a normal parenting tendency to focus one’s attention upon what’s wrong, bad or weak. When we do that, we may actually end up strengthening that which is wrong, bad or weak. So be careful not to focus your attention solely upon your children’s inabilities or bad behaviors. Discipline your own mind to focus on their abilities and strengths. E.g., “I know you’ve been selfish in this situation, but you’re a much better person than that. I’ve seen you be thoughtful and kind, and I’d like to see more of that behavior.” Put your best shots on your child’s capabilities and your expected behavior. Build upon your child’s strengths. Kids who feel lousy about themselves tend to be in conflict more often than kids who feel good about themselves.

J. Get help. If you don’t have the skills or personal capability to lead your family toward relational health, or if you can’t help family members overcome conflicts, then don’t just keep trying the same old things. Seek help. Talk to a pastor. Go to a family therapist. It’s actually a sign of strength for a person who can’t do a task, to seek help. Most of all, pray. Invite God’s help and pray for His wisdom. Pray that He will strengthen and guide you. Pray that He may orchestrate situations and solutions to assist you in your role as a parent.

Ten Minute Reflection

Either discuss the following situation with one other person, or write a one-page response: One child in the family system is consistently belligerent and manipulative ~ bad attitude ~ self-centered ~ aggressive. This child consistently seems to provoke conflict between himself/herself, and the rest of the siblings.

Use the tools from this lesson to create a parental game-plan to a) establish parental authority in the home; b) challenge and modify the attitude and behavior of the child; c) re-establish healthy relationships between conflicted siblings.

VII. Epilogue

Good parenting leads to families that generally enjoy positive and healthy relationships with each other. All families have conflict from time to time, but in healthy families ongoing or repetitive conflicts are challenged and resolved. Nobody is allowed to maintain an aloof "distance" from one another. Nobody is allowed to harshly treat another party. Repetitive aggression is faced with parental authority and clear boundaries.

By contrast, family systems that are in trouble allow ongoing dysfunctional or painful behavior. Problems don't get resolved ~ they just fester. Relationships are allowed to remain hostile, distant, painful, abusive, etc. So here's a general rule of thumb: The greater the habitual, ongoing conflict in a family system, the more dysfunctional it will become, and the greater the probability that negative roles (e.g., Hero, Scapegoat, Victim, Aggressor, etc.) will be adopted by family members.

Good parenting requires involvement with the kids, listening to their problems, and treating them with dignity. Certainly, there will be childish attempts at manipulation, distortion of truth, power plays, and the like. That's part of childhood. But parents must always realize that they are responsible not only for feeding and clothing their kids, but also for helping their kids learn how to work through and overcome conflict. The skills in this lesson should help in this regard.