

10 Causes of Sibling Conflict

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

1. *Parental favoritism is a problem when the special attention goes only to one child, to the exclusion of the others.*

It is a problem:

- a. when it comes with strings that the child must meet a parent's emotional needs
- b. when the child is a buffer between the parents or fills the void of an empty marriage
- c. when the specialness of the child helps to stabilize the marriage
- d. when the favoring of one child is to spite or hurt the other parent
- e. because it leads to the other siblings resenting the favored one.

2. *Children recreate parents' conflicts*

Children model what they see with their parents, developing a relationship with each other that mirrors the parents' conflicts.

- a. If one parent is passive to the other's aggression, one child becomes the victim to a sibling, not fighting back.
- b. The child aligned with the passive parent may "model" for that parent how to stand up and fight for oneself.
- c. If both parents fight verbally or physically, the children absorb the tension and spew it at each other – ratcheting it up several notches.
- d. When parents don't want to argue in front of the children, their anger still gets indirectly transmitted to the children who reflect it off each other.

3. *Parents recreate their own sibling issues with their children*

The sibling relationship is so powerful it flows through the generations. Parents' expectations for their children are based on their own history. If they had a good relationship, they expect to recreate that; if they had a conflictual one, they fear that will happen to their children. Their expectations predetermine their children's relationship with each other.

- a. Those with positive experiences as a child, over-react when their children have normal squabbles.
 - b. Those with negative experiences over-react by stepping in to ease conflicts unnecessarily.
4. *One parent is "switchboard operator" for the siblings*
 The hub of a family's communication is usually the mother – because she knows what happens for each child. Thus, she comes between the children, interfering with their choice of what to share with each other and how to behave with each other. When she unnecessarily intervenes, she
- a. interferes with their problem solving ability
 - b. prevents them from learning to modulate their anger themselves, to find non-argumentative solutions
 - c. teaches them to continue fighting until she steps in, so they don't learn to set their own limits
 - d. helps them avoid finding alternate ways to settle conflicts with someone stronger, bigger – such as bartering, negotiating, using humor, or outwitting a sibling
 - e. blocks them from the closeness they feel when they do resolve their own problems.
5. *Parents assign crystallize behavioral roles for each child*
 Parents' expectations often result in directing their children into rigid behavioral roles which then become a crystallized part of their children's identity. When aspects of a child's behavior or interest is praised or dismissed, the child is shaped into a specific role. These roles then rigidly define the child's identity. For example, the funny child becomes the "family comic"; the quiet one gets labeled "shy." Parents may direct a child into a specific role to prevent competition or rivalry, which eventually backfires. The rigid roles leave children less flexible to fully develop themselves.
6. *Dysfunctional parents may cause siblings to turn anger onto each other*
 When one or both parents are physically, verbally, sexually, or emotionally abusive, to each other or the children, the children find their own ways to survive. One way is to recreate the same abusive pattern on each other.

7. *Dysfunctional parents cause sibling to isolate themselves*
When one or both parents are physically, verbally, sexually, or emotionally abusive, to each other or the children, the children find their own ways to survive. Rather than turn to each other for mutual support and nurturance (or fighting), they may isolate themselves from each other, believing that is the safest way to protect themselves.
8. *Younger sibling feels abandoned as older moves away*
When siblings are close in age and like each other, there is a normal developmental shift that occurs as the older one reaches adolescence and has less investment in the younger siblings. If not at that time, the break occurs as the older graduates from high school. The younger one takes the abandonment personally and feels discarded and rejected. Over the years, these feelings often get turned (usually unconsciously) into anger at the older sibling – who has no idea why the younger is being mean or avoiding him or her.
9. *Cultural preference in looks, abilities, personality*
Unfortunately, society values some traits and physical characteristics more than others, such as athletic, blond hair and blue eyes. Each culture has its own preferences. Regardless how a parent tries to equalize the children, they know when they do or don't meet the standard. The child with the socially valued attributes may tease or isolate from the one who doesn't meet the standard. Or, he or she may try to diminish the valued traits or develop a behavior problem to not stand out from the other sibling.
10. *Mental illness and neurological conditions*
When a neurological condition (i.e., Attention Deficit Disorder, Tourette Syndrome) is undiagnosed, the behaviors can be disruptive, even violent. Even if the parents are trying to get help, the other siblings have to live with the out-of-control brother or sister. They may feel guilty about hating a sibling who is weird or violent and who is taking so much of parents' attention.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has been a marriage and family therapist for over 40 years with an expertise in adult siblings. She is author of numerous [books on relationships](#) – for siblings, marriage, singles, and friendships. Since 1996, she has run [Unique Retreats for Women](#) and

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