

# Your Sibling Relationships May Follow an Hourglass Pattern

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Some siblings have always been close. However, most have gone through different periods of closeness. Your siblings may weave in and out of your life in varying degrees of intensity, depending on your age and your life situation.

One way to think about this pattern is to picture an hourglass, with the flat top of the glass being childhood and the flat bottom being old age. The long line across the top and bottom represents a lot of contact during childhood and old age, the periods when siblings feel closest to each other. The hourglass progressively narrows as you move into your adolescent and young adulthood, and reaches the "waist" as siblings have minimal connection during their 20s and 30s while establishing their own careers and personal lives.



During the childrearing years, the hourglass begins to widen. Siblings increase their contact, wanting their children to know their cousins and the extended family. Then, in your middle years, you are often brought even closer as you have to work together around your aging parents.

Unless adult siblings really like each other, it seems the reasons for continued contact would diminish once the children are grown and parents have died. Yet, research supports the widening of the hourglass in old age; senior siblings talk to each other at least once a week. And many even more to live closer to each other.

Here is a more detailed description of the quality of the sibling relationship in each of these age periods. Obviously, this does not fit for everyone.

## **Childhood**

Siblings who have less than 4 years in age difference are called high access. Regardless how they relate to each other when parents are present, when alone, high access children form their own subgroup of the family. They may have their own rules and hierarchies. In fact, they have their own separate history. (My brothers still chuckle how they used to slide down the winding two story laundry shoot. This amazes my parents, who question this, "How could they without our knowing about it?")

Young siblings evolve their own rhythm of interaction. In fact, think about your childhood siblings as your first marriage, that is your first life experience of two people of the same generation learning the back and forth flow between loving and fighting. It's a time when children learn to negotiate around toys in the way adults must negotiate around the proverbial toothpaste -- do you squeeze from the bottom or the middle?

If you are lucky, you have both positive and negative memories. You spent your childhood cruising between taunting (or being taunted) and playing with your siblings. Despite the yelling, you always knew you loved each other. If you weren't so lucky, you may have felt hatred, terror, or perhaps worse, no connection at all with your siblings.

Low access siblings, those with more than 4 years difference in age, had little overlap in their lives. They probably did not share friends, bedroom, or clothes. They may not even have known each other very well.

## **Young Adulthood**

Following the hourglass as it narrows, you move through your 20s, and early 30s. There are some siblings who remain close, even attend the same college, share friends, maybe live together. They consider each other among their best friends. However, these are probably among the minority of young adult siblings.

Most often, during these years, there is less contact with your siblings. The focus moves away from family and towards the outside world. You may be busy establishing yourself as an adult, settling in your career, looking for a partner, raising a family.

Childhood is not far enough away to have really forgotten those old jealousies, resentments, rejections. Images you had of each other back then have become “frozen” in your mind. “She’s bossy.” “He’s lazy and manipulative.” You hold on to these images, frozen in time as they used to be, not recognizing your siblings have changed. They do the same with you. For them, you remain the “cry baby,” “goody two-shoes,” “troublemaker.”

You may think your unfinished business with each sibling is of no relevance in your life at this point. You may not recognize how you read meaning into their behavior as if they were the same young brother or sister. And, they do the same with you. You may not see how you transfer these frozen sibling images onto other people in your current life, so you keep bumping into variations of your troublesome siblings among your friends and at work.

### **Adulthood**

The hourglass begins to expand again in adulthood, with the arrival of the next generation. Your children or theirs draws you back to the extended family around holidays or summer vacations. You may want your children to know their cousins, aunts, and uncles.

Despite your maturity in the rest of your life, you may be surprised to find when you are together, those old sibling feelings are not far from the surface, too easily reopened. You may tell yourself you’re an adult now; you prepare for visits by promising yourself you won’t get caught up in them.

If it seems you can’t run away from these familiar quarrels, it’s true. You can’t. Most siblings, though, are able to keep these old feelings tucked away enough to get together with the whole family a couple of times a year – with only one blow up or two, or three, or....

### **Mid-Life Adulthood**

As your parents get older, get sick or die, you and your siblings may have to deal more with each other. All the unresolved issues from your childhood resurface – with a vengeance. You may be squabbling with each other like you did back then.

The fighting now, though, has a variety of meanings. The old jealousies or other unfinished business with your siblings are still locked inside. Now they indirectly resurface around the task of decision making for your parents. Your frozen images of your siblings as bossy, manipulative, shirking their chores, get transferred to this new task. The ways in which you differ in helping your parents may reflect your childhood style of arguing: pitting one sib against the other, going behind the other's back, passive-aggressively "giving up." The questions about allegiances may be the same as back then – who sides with which parent, who feels left out or favored, who is caught between your parents or between one parent and a sibling?

There are a myriad of reasons why the unfinished business from childhood, even if contained over the years, now resurfaces. By fighting with each other, keeping the focus on your siblings, you all avoid the reality of your parents' aging (and your own). You avoid any grief or guilt you have about your parents. You don't have to ask yourself hard questions, like, "Did you get what you needed from them? What unfinished business do I still have with them? Have I done enough for them now?"

Along with this suitcase of old feelings, there are current ones. Fighting with your siblings can deflect from your feelings of inadequacy and helplessness of curing your parents or relieving their pain. Your own mid-life and your parents' aging bring you face to face with your mortality. Preparing for or dealing with the loss of your parents often raises feelings about your becoming an "adult orphan," the older generation. You have to confront (or avoid confronting) how life is running out on you. You look into the mirror and wonder who is that old woman, that old man? Where'd you go? Basically, it's easier to fight with your siblings – it's more familiar and less anxiety provoking.

### **Old Age**

Research confirms the hourglass does return to its fullest size in old age as your siblings assume more importance in your life. By age 65, over one half of people with siblings talk or see them at least once a week. Many even move so they can live closer in their declining years. While the old rivalries may still be there, they have softened or are just avoided. No matter how intense the hostility during childhood or the middle adult years, by old age, only three percent of siblings cut themselves off from each

other, that is, go through their last years without any contact with their sisters and brothers.

Perhaps the most important thing siblings provide for each other in old age is a validation they once had been young and vital. They are the only ones who know you used to be skinny; they are the only ones who remember the home run you hit, or the cigarettes you used to sneak in the garage.

When retelling these exploits, you are that 11 year old, not the wrinkled face in the mirror. In old age, siblings provide a continuity of your family history, the scrapbook of family stories. They are the only ones who can laugh, 60 or 80 years later, at just the mention of Uncle Ruby. You all know that's shorthand for the longer story of how every Passover he spilled red wine on the white table cloth.]

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 does weekend retreats for adult siblings. She has offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati, Ohio. She is also available for phone and skype consultations.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis  
DrKarenGailLewis.com  
[drkgl@DrkarengailLewis.com](mailto:drkgl@DrkarengailLewis.com)  
301-585-5814