

How Sisters Get Caught in Their Childhood Patterns

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

It's always sad when sisters close in age don't get along. You love each other because you are related, but when you harbor resentments from childhood, it's hard to like each other.

Barbara, at 46, is two years older than Yvonne. They live about 30 minutes apart. They have several children each, including eight year old sons who are best friends.

"But it's so friggin' hard," exclaims Barbara, a petite woman with long straight dark brown hair. Yvonne's always complaining that she has to drive further to get the boys, or my son gets more attention than hers, or that my husband and I have more money so we buy our children more.

Yvonne counters. "Mom and Dad always help her more than me, and they call her more often. It's just like when we were kids; you always got more sprinkles on your ice cream."

"Grow up, Yvonne," Barbara hisses.

Yvonne heaves a deep sigh. "It's easy for you to say. I know it sounds childish, but I can't help that's what I feel. You do get more. You always have. You were the cute, petite one, the smart one, the goody-two-shoes. I was the big lumbering kid with curls going in all directions. I could never sit still in school, was always getting in trouble. You were the perfect child, and now you're the perfect Mom."

This may sound like childish rivalry but it is very painful and real to Yvonne, who is competent enough to manage a music store and be president of her townhouse association. But ghosts from childhood have long arms and can reach far into the future if these old images aren't addressed.

Last year, just after Thanksgiving, the sisters called asking for help. They had been at their parents' for the holiday and the anger between them was so awful, Yvonne knew they had to do something drastic or she would never want to be with Barbara

again. As Yvonne put it, "We are sisters; our children will have Bar Mitzvah together; we share parents. Our lives will always be entwined. So, we have to fix things." Yet, they both had their doubts anything could really change.

Regardless of age, ghosts from childhood permeate siblings' relationships. There are numerous reasons why young siblings have problems with each other, such as parental favoritism, one child having more socially valued attributes, one having neurological or behavioral problems. Barbara and Yvonne are affected by the most common reason -- crystallized roles.

In most families, children develop roles that balance two opposites: one child good and the other bad; one athletic, the other musical; one serious, the other funny. It's as if they are locked into these roles, unable to free themselves. Unfortunately, this can become a formula for built-in resentment and jealousy.

In talking about their roles, Yvonne believed she had never measured up to Barbara. Even as adults, she felt Barbara rubbed her nose in how much better off she was than Yvonne.

She was shocked, therefore, when Barbara acknowledged being in the "good child" role, but explained what a high price she had paid. "I saw what Mom and Dad went through with you; I didn't want them to ever have problems with me. I was real young when I made a pact with myself; I would never challenge them and would always do whatever they wanted. When they told me I couldn't take the dance lessons I so dearly wanted, I decided I didn't really want to dance. I have a gazillion examples like that. I gave up myself in order to be their good daughter."

Yvonne was not yet ready to feel sorry for her privileged sister. "I could never get their approval. I remember at some point saying if they were going to see me as bad, I might as well do bad things. I certainly couldn't be good like you."

As they shared memories from their elementary years, which is when roles get formed, they saw where their parents had essentially guided them into these contradictory roles, and how their different personalities made it easy to accept them.

Families have a hard time letting a member change the crystallized role. However, when sisters work together, it is doable.

I had Barbara and Yvonne write down all the negative images they carried about the other. When they compared the list, they were surprised; it was so different from their image of themselves.

The sisters stared at each other. Maybe they stared at the little girl deep inside. I imagined new twists to old images racing through their minds. I imagined they struggled seeing past scenes from a new angle. Who knows what really goes through another's mind while transformations are happening?

They sat for a long time. Then, as if simultaneously, they stood and hugged and cried. I wish I could say that things improved dramatically after that. They didn't, but this discussion became the foundation for finding different interpretations to the problems they had with each other.

They made a new pact, this time with each other. When annoyed, they would check to see if the feelings were warranted today or left over from childhood.

That was 12 months ago. Today, they are so aware of the challenge of not falling back into those old roles. It is easier to ignore things they do not like about each other, says Barbara, "when I no longer have her tied into those crystallized roles. Now, if I don't like something, I just shrug and go on. I don't get hooked."

Start a new tradition, this holiday season. Look more closely at the roles you and your sisters (and brothers) have absorbed from childhood and talk about how to work your way out of them.

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.

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