



SIBLINGS WITHOUT RIVALRY

(when kids won't stop fighting)



by Paul Freedman



There are, in this world, certain absolutes.

Things we can be sure about, things we can always count on. Like, for example, the sky is blue ... mammals are hairy ... pigs don't fly.

And when you join the parenting fraternity, you discover some new ones: toast will always

land peanut-butter-side-down on your plush,

spotless carpet ... your kids will give you their vomiting-bug ... and siblings will always fight with each other.

Siblings will always fight? Well, that's what we've always thought.

But a while ago, we came across a book (a battered library book that'd obviously seen some action). Called *Siblings Without Rivalry*, this New York Times Bestseller promised to reduce conflict and generate goodwill among brothers and sisters ... and told parents how to have siblings *without* rivalry.

Really?

It sounded a little like a *Tui* billboard, or some dubious cure pedalled by a snake-oil-salesman. But we checked the skies for pigs, then flipped open the cover to find out for ourselves ...

Thankfully, it was actually a great read – with some sharp insights on achieving precisely what the title suggests! It was a little like

striking gold – and we had to discover more. A quick *Google* search, a few emails to New York, and we were talking to one of the authors herself. Adele Faber co-wrote the book with Elaine Mazlish, and Adele was very happy to chat.

She's still very involved running parenting seminars and helping frazzled mums and dads with their combative kids, but she welcomed our questions. So to kick things off we asked:

“This parental headache caused by battling sons and daughters – is it universal? Has it always been this way? Or is it one of these modern sicknesses infecting westernised countries?”



ADELE: Oh no, it's universal alright! It's what Cain did to Abel ... what Joseph's brothers did to him, when his father gave him that 'coat of many colours'. This is ancient stuff! It speaks to the heart of the human condition.

GRAPEVINE: So, what's the trigger? What sends kids off into conflict?

ADELE: Well, the mere arrival of other siblings casts a terrible shadow over the child's life. It threatens everything that's essential to his wellbeing.

GV: A terrible shadow? That's pretty harsh, isn't it?

ADELE: Well, think of it like this ... An additional child in the family means LESS: less time alone with parents; less attention for hurts and disappointments; less approval for accomplishments. And, most frightening of all, if Mum and Dad are showing all that love, concern and enthusiasm for my brother and sister – maybe that newcomer is worth more than me? And that must mean I'm worth less – I'm WORTHLESS!

So it's no wonder kids fight so hard to be first or best! Why wouldn't they attack their siblings?

WORLD TURNED UPSIDE-DOWN

Kid number one used to have all of Mummy, all of Daddy, exclusively to himself – but now there's a rival moving in! Many parents just don't understand why their cute, lovable child is suddenly so hostile. They wonder what on earth has happened!

To help parents get in touch with their child's 'meanness', I give them this little role-play exercise that's usually very enlightening ...

I say: "Imagine that your spouse puts an arm around you and says, 'Honey, I love you so much and you are so wonderful that I've decided to have ANOTHER WIFE, just like you!'"

I challenge them to think about their reaction and write it down. Then I go on, "When the new wife finally arrives, you discover she's very young and kind of cute. And when the three of you are out together, people say 'Hello' to you politely and then exclaim ecstatically over the newcomer ... 'Ooooh! Isn't she ADORABLE? Hello sweetheart, you're so precious!' Then they turn to you and say, 'So how do YOU like the new wife?'"

What are they gonna say?

GV: Probably something we can't print in Grapevine!

ADELE: Exactly. Then I continue with the role-play ... "Now, the new wife needs clothing. So your husband goes into your closet and gets one of your tops and skirts and gives them to her. 'But they're MINE!' you say.

"Well, since you've put on a little weight, honey, your husband patiently explains, 'Your clothes are now too tight. But they'll fit her perfectly!'"

Now, nobody's going to react positively to that!

"But then it gets really bad," I continue, "because the new wife is maturing rapidly. Every day she seems smarter and more competent. Then one day, while you're struggling to work the new computer your husband bought you, she bursts into the room and says, 'Oh, can I use it? I know how!'"

"Well, no way are you going to share that with her! You're going to throw her out of the room! And when you say she



can't use it, she runs off crying to your husband!

SHARE?
YOU'VE GOTTA BE KIDDING!

Then to make it worse, she returns minutes later with her face all tear-stained, and his arm around her ... and he says to you, 'Why are you being so mean? What's the harm in letting her have a turn? Why can't you just SHARE?'"

All I can tell you is, when I ask my groups for their reactions, they are pretty succinct: like 'Torture!' 'Murder!' Even those who thought of themselves as being pretty laid-back are surprised to find how enraged and threatened they feel.

GV: That would be devastating! Does it work equally well with the men?

ADELE: Sure. I just do the same thing with the genders reversed.

GV: So your point is, I guess, that these are the feelings an older sibling would actually experience?

ADELE: That's right, although they don't always reveal it.

I remember one woman who came home with a scan of her new baby in-utero. She showed it excitedly to her daughter saying, "This is the very first picture of your new baby brother!" She stuck it on the top of the refrigerator door – at which point the little girl dragged her chair over, climbed up, ripped the picture off and stuck it at the bottom of the door. "I go on top!" she said.

Then there was a woman from Central America. "Oh, I have no problems with Maria," she told me in her thick accent. "She loves the new baby. She kisses her all the time and shows her off to all the relatives – she's so excited about the new baby. But last night she said to me, 'Mummy, I had a dream last night. I dreamed we had

a terrible fire. The house burned down but everybody got out. Mummy got out ... Daddy got out ... I got out ...

“And then after a short pause ... ‘Poor baby!’”

I remember, in my own home, being stuck inside for three days – me and three kids – and I was looking for some activities to keep them busy. It was difficult, and they were always battling with one another. Finally, I decided that we all needed a break, so I said, “Let’s go into the kitchen and have a snack.”

As they were munching away, I mentioned, “Boy! It can be hard having to live with a brother or sister and share stuff. I’ll bet you sometimes wish you were the only one?”

Immediately, my six-year-old son said, “Yeah! Let’s kill them both, and I’ll be the only one!”

My daughter said, “Oh yeah? I’ll kill you first!”

Finally my youngest (he must have been four or five) tugged at my sleeve and said, “I wouldn’t want to kill him, Mummy.” He looked up at me through big brown eyes and I thought, “Well, at least I managed to produce one good one!”

Then he added, in his cute lisp, “I would want him to die t-h-l-o-w-l-y ... tho I could thee him thuffer!”

GV: Oh dear! So you had to do a quick revision of how many ‘good ones’ you’d produced?

ADELE: I sure did! It showed me how there’s this huge reservoir of hostility and, often, we don’t even realise it.

GV: So let’s get practical. How do parents usually react when a child comes to them screaming, “He’s being mean to me!” or “He’s taken my toy!”?

ADELE: If the child complains of being teased, lots of us react by saying something like, “Oh, stop bothering him!” or “Just work it out with your brother!” There’s a strong tendency to brush it off.

INSTEAD OF IGNORING IT ...

The first thing I do is acknowledge their feelings: “Hey, you two sound so angry at each other!” They’ll say something like, “Yeah, he did so-and-so.” And the other will come back with, “But he started it when he ...” So I try hard to listen to them.

Then I’ll add, “Well, this isn’t an easy problem. James is making a zoo, but Sam wants to play with the giraffe. Is that right?”

There are two steps there. The first: we acknowledge the feelings – “Boy, you two sound so angry!” And then, second, we describe the problem ... with great respect. That respect is really important, because our tendency is to snap: “What? You’re squabbling over some stupid toy animals? That’s crazy. It’s because of people like you that we have wars in the world!”

GV: True enough – that sounds like something lots of us would say!

ADELE: Yes. Common ... and unhelpful! What we need to do is describe the problem with respect: “This is a tough issue! James is making a zoo, but Sam needs the giraffe and it belongs to him! Two kids who both want to play with the same toy at the same time!”

Now comes the real test. You need to say something like, “You know what? This isn’t easy, but I have confidence that if you two put your heads together,” (I say



this very slowly), “I bet you’ll be able to come up with a solution that feels fair to James,” and I point to James, “and fair to you too, Sam!” and I point to Sam. “Let me know what you come up with ...”

And then, I LEAVE THE ROOM!

GV: You leave the room?

ADELE: Otherwise they start performing for me – and I don’t want that. I want them to start to negotiate. There’s usually a stunned silence. What are they going to do now? And then it starts:

“I was going to make a zoo!”

“Well, I only wanted to play with the giraffe.”

“But I need all my animals!”

“Well, could I just have one?”

“Not the giraffe – I need the giraffe!”

“Well, can I borrow a lion? You’ve got three lions.”

“Oh, okay – but nothing else.”

And they go back and forth ... back and forth.

GV: So you acknowledge that they’re angry – and that it’s a tricky problem?

ADELE: Absolutely! Then you state the problem, so they know you understand. You tell them that you believe they can come up with a solution where everyone’s happy ... and then you leave them to it!

Often, they’re so pleased with themselves that they feel no need to get back to you.

GV: How about offering a reward if they successfully work it out?

ADELE: Oh no, don’t even think of it! I just hear the word and I get offended! Lots of parents rely on rewards to sort of ‘grease-the-wheels’. But we don’t work for rewards. We work because we live in a household and have to learn how to get along – despite our deep, in-built differences.

A MIXED BLESSING

The problem with a short-term fix is you build a long-term problem. As soon as you remove the possibility of a reward, the children not only revert to their old behaviour, but you might’ve actually made things worse. Why would they bother doing anything they don’t earn a reward for?

GV: Point taken! How about when we make comparisons between our kids? Like: “Why can’t you be ready for school on time? Your brother always is!” ... “Why don’t you eat your food without complaining, like your sister does?” Not a good idea – comparisons?

ADELE: No. Comparisons result in instant hatred.

GV: Ouch! But it’s very common, isn’t it?

ADELE: Yes, you’re right! In fact, I find

that even after years of giving these seminars, I still have to bite my own tongue not to compare ... “We’re all in the car ready to go and you’re still getting dressed. Why can’t you be like your brother?” It just pours out of your mouth without you even thinking. Resisting the urge to compare is something you have to work at. Anything corrective you say to this child, say to him without any reference to his siblings.

GV: Presumably, comparisons feed right into that fear you mentioned earlier – making kids worry that they’re not as good, or as acceptable as the others ...

ADELE: Yes – “You love them more than me!” I’ve seen the results of comparisons over and over again. And the results are never good.

GV: How about when parents try to build-up a child, but still do it with comparisons? Like, “Jenny, you’re the artistic one in our family, Gary’s the sportsman, Jos, you’re our scholar – and Julie’s the nurse!” Can that be just as damaging?

ADELE: Sure. It’s really deadly when parents stick kids in rigid roles. “You’re the artist. You’re the scientist.” We all can be bits of everything! I remember as a little girl having piano lessons. I was making very slow progress. My sister had lessons first and was a gifted pianist. My music teacher would yell at me through the whole lesson – he’d say, “No you don’t do it that way – do it this way. That’s wrong!”

My mother would sit there and say encouragingly, “Well, she’s very good at spelling!”

I stuck with it and I really liked it. But finally there was a family discussion, and it was decided that my sister was the pianist, and I just didn’t have musical

talent. (Kids always believe it must be true, when adults dump a verdict like this on them.) My horrible teacher made it clear he was suffering having such a talentless student as me.

The point is, every time I heard my sister creating those beautiful sounds, I remember thinking, “I’ll never be able to do that!”

And what a loss that was to me! Because even though I knew that I played poorly, I did enjoy playing to the level that I could. And that’s why you play, isn’t it? For your own pleasure, primarily. For the joy of music and the sense of accomplishment.

FOLLOW YOUR DREAM

It’s always better to affirm each child for whatever gift they have, rather than comparing them to each other. And affirm their right to explore and develop that talent – whatever it is. Let every child have access to all the avenues of expression (time and money permitting).

One child’s gifts shouldn’t preclude another child exploring his or her gifts too – even if one is clearly better.

GV: Okay, since we’re talking about affirming children ... what should we do when a child comes up and says “You love him more than me ...”? Most parents instinctively respond, “No, I love you all the same!”

ADELE: I know. And kids never believe it. I remember once I was really tired, lying in bed, trying to read and my six-year-old son came charging in and said, “Mummy, who do you love the best?”

I wasn’t giving my author’s response at that moment! So I just said, “Oh honey, I



love you all the same.” (In my head I was thinking, “Oh please, just go away and let me read!”) Then he said, “But suppose we were in a row boat and we tipped over and were drowning! Which one would you save?”

“I don’t know,” I mumbled. “Probably the one that was closest to me.”

“But suppose we were all the same closeness?”

Suddenly I woke up! “What are you doing to me?” I shouted. “You’re torturing me! Are you asking me to imagine having to decide whether or not to lose someone like you? You are the only ‘you’ in the whole wide world. I could never ever get another! There isn’t a person like you anywhere – and you’re asking me to imagine that I’d let you drown?” I said, “Get out of here!”

GV: Was he happy with that response??

ADELE: Oh, he was delighted! It was the best answer I could have given.

GV: Okay ... another area where kids

place big demands on parents is that whole “You’re not being fair!” thing. How do we cope with this demand for fairness, and ensure everything our kids get is even?

ADELE: That’s an impossible goal! But we can tune in to the feelings and needs of the moment.

AS AND WHEN WE CAN

The problem is, children always do compare ... “How much did he get? Was it more than I got?” But if the understanding in the household is one of “Sometimes, we each receive in terms of individual need ...” that really helps. Here again, we acknowledge what the ‘deprived’ child is feeling ...

For example: “Even though your pants still fit you, when you see Jimmy get a new pair, it can make you want one too. Won’t it be nice when you need a new pair of pants, because then we’ll be going on a shopping trip just for you!”

Or: "It can feel so unfair when it's Macey's birthday, and everybody makes such a fuss over her and she has all these presents. And your birthday isn't for another six months! Won't you be happy when that day rolls around!"

It's your acknowledgement of life's inequities and respect for their wishes that helps children cope with reality.

GV: So ... the question we've been leading up to in all this is ... HOW DO WE STOP THE KIDS FIGHTING?

ADELE: Well, there's no one simple answer that works, because there are different levels of fighting.

Level #1 is low-grade bickering – "Did so!" ... "Did not!"... "Yes you did!"... "No I didn't!" Ignore it. Tune it out. Think about your next holiday or how nice it'll be when the kids get married and leave home. Tell yourself, "Don't interfere. They're having an important experience in conflict resolution."

Level #2 is when the situation is hotting-up. And they may need an adult to help them through this one! As I mentioned earlier, the first thing you do here is acknowledge their anger at each other. "Wow! You two really sound MAD at each other!" That immediately helps. Instead of just another level of irritation ("Will you two stop that fighting!"), now there's an adult voice helping them look at themselves in a way they can accept. And they'll tell you, for example, "He tried to take the puppy when it had just settled down in my arms!" ... "But I want to have a turn. It's my turn now!"

The next thing the adult can do is describe the problem – with respect. "Look, this isn't easy. Two children and only one puppy!" And then, as I said before, you

express your confidence that they can solve this: "You know what? I believe you two will be able to think of a way to handle this that's fair to both of you – and especially a way that's fair to the puppy!"

Then, get out of there – leave the room.

GV: Okay. So what happens in a Level #3 fight?

ADELE: This is where it potentially becomes dangerous. If you hear the sounds of conflict and they're really loud and angry, you have to step in and ask, "Is this a play-fight or a real fight?"

FUN OR FOR REAL?

Play-fights are permitted. Some kids really enjoy their play fights. But real fights are not! Let the kids know, "Play fighting only by mutual consent. That means, if it's not fun for everyone – if there's even one person who doesn't like it – it has to STOP."

Then there are those times when it's too rough for YOU (too noisy ... things might be getting broken ... pets could be hurt ... neighbours might be disturbed): "Hey! You may be playing, but this is too rough for me! You two have to find another activity"

Now, the most dangerous situation of all is where you have to step in to prevent injury. A parent in one of my seminars told of the time she saw her son, wielding a long, sharp knife, chasing her daughter – who was defending herself with a hot iron. Clearly this called for immediate adult intervention! And, again, that's the time to describe what you see but with urgency. "OH NO! I see two very angry children who're about to really hurt each other!" Then separate them.



GV: No discussion about who's right or wrong or how it all got started? Just intervene and separate?

ADELE: That's right – and you need a sense of urgency: “Quick! We need a cooling-off time! This is very dangerous. You – go to this end of the house. And you – go to that end. NOW!” You cannot allow a situation to continue where physical harm could happen.

Once they've calmed down a bit, you might ask each of them to write down their version of the incident – how it started, how it developed – and to be sure to include their recommendations for the future.

GV: So it isn't just a pipedream? We parents really can reduce conflict and generate goodwill among brothers and sisters in our families? Siblings without rivalry – it is doable, right?

ADELE: Yes. Absolutely. Now, I know this stuff isn't easy. It takes work. It's not like, “Follow steps 1-2-3 ... and here's your perfect family!” And, as we find with

parents everywhere, the real challenge is those old habits. Even though you've read about and thought about new ways to handle your kids when they're bickering or fighting, it's the old words that come pouring out – almost instinctively: “What is wrong with you?” ... “How many times do I have to tell you?” ... “You've done it again! You'll never learn!” ... “Why can't you be more like your sister/brother?”

That old stuff keeps bubbling up – especially when we're angry or upset.

But the good news is, little by little, dramatic changes can take place. It's not a pipedream. This really can work ... 🍇

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