

Sibling Rivalry

‘How did we come out of the same womb?’

By Karen Doherty & Georgia Coleridge

For many siblings, their relationship is like a forest, dark and deep – full of unresolved, complex issues from their childhood. Even when they grow older and leave home, the undercurrents in their relationship can remain. So when they see each other, or even talk on the phone, old emotions get stirred back up.

The rivalry can start from the moment a subsequent child is born. Bickering, fighting and hitting affects four out of five families, so there aren't many of us who have never experienced it. It can be exacerbated by feelings of jealousy, competitiveness and resentment, the wish to win their parents' approval and the desire to be more powerful or successful.

a festering wound

When children are little, rivalry can be as simple as minor tit-for-tat annoyance – ‘She did this’, ‘He did that’. But the one-upmanship can become more severe, a little power game that goes on and on. They can make fun of each other, doing or saying whatever it takes to boost themselves up and make their siblings feel insecure. If the envy or competitiveness becomes entrenched, particularly if one child gets the worst of it, the entire house can be held hostage to their ups and downs. It's as though each sibling holds the reins to the self-esteem and sense of wellbeing of the other.

Siblings can also have a nasty habit of holding on to what the other has done in the past, never letting him forget or leave behind his mistakes and move on. They can push each other's buttons better than anybody. Their shared history means they know exactly where

the other's tender spots lie and, when they want a reaction, they go straight for them.

Another classic sibling issue is the longing by one sibling (often, but not always, the younger) to be noticed or needed by the other.

In extreme cases, this longing can turn into desperation, with one child sacrificing whatever it takes to gain his brother or sister's approval. The other (often the older) may get irritated and try to make him stop, or treat him with complete disdain, feeling entitled to take almost anything from him, from the food off his plate to the clothes from his closet. The pattern may be set where one is always in the power position, but both children feel resentful.

Though some siblings try to copy each other, others feel equally desperate to exaggerate their differences to make a statement and mark themselves as individuals. Even when they get older, they can still find they compare themselves against their brothers and sisters, each using their own definition of success in order to establish their sense of who they are in the world.

In some ways it is surprising that siblings are not more alike. Brought up in the same house, by the same parents, with a big chunk of shared DNA, you would expect them to have a similar outlook and attitude to life. But we all know families where the complete opposite is true. Siblings can be as different as two strangers sitting side-by-side on a London bus.

Noticing the differences between you and your siblings can be a positive process; as we mark out our own territory, we start to learn who we are. But using our siblings as benchmarks can

also be destructive. We may be less or more musical, academic, sporty or practical than our sibling, but so what? In a family, there should be room for more than one musician, bookworm, athlete, handyman or whatever.

memories cast a shadow

Many people find that that when they grow up and move away from home they can shed competitive old labels. But many others find that spending time with their siblings can make old patterns re-appear. If your siblings make you feel like a child again, you can fall right back into the familiar old loop of comparing, feeling insecure or put-upon, or lapse into awkward, defensive silences.

Part of the reason we can overreact is that we have grown up and changed. We are no longer the whiny toddler who broke their toys, the ten-year-old who constantly got them into trouble, or the teenager who belittled them. So we see no reason why they should continue to treat us that way. But worse is the uncomfortable way that siblings can still see through us. As children, our siblings usually have no trouble at all telling us when we've made a complete idiot of ourselves. The closeness of the sibling relationship allows them to be painfully honest and brutal with the truth – a level of honesty not always appreciated and not possible in many other relationships. Even as adults, they still know us so well that they can see right through our half-truths and prevarications, into the layers we can usually keep hidden.

Not all sibling relationships are toxic. Even siblings who bicker and fight can be

affectionate and have fun together, and it's surprising how many of them will defend each other when it counts. Loyalty can lead little children to conspire in some of the most unimaginable ways – sharing hidden secrets, standing up for each other and even lying on behalf of one another. Later, when they're older, they may look back fondly at how they pulled the wool over their parents' eyes, hooting with laughter as they remember old times, like when they climbed up the kitchen cabinets to steal the treats hidden up there.

When writing our latest book, *Sibling Rivalry – Seven Simple Solutions*, we met plenty of adults who have very close relationships with their siblings and many who are the best of friends. Some of them fought as children, but have managed to resolve their differences. As sibling relationships are the longest in most people's lives, it makes a huge difference when they can be supportive.

But we were also amazed by how many adults still had ambivalent or even hostile feelings about their siblings; trapped by the past, unable to break free and move on. While some siblings remain loathe to address old issues for fear that stepping on the ice will cause it to break, we also found that it's never too late to solve sibling rivalry. Understanding each other's views – about why things happened the way they did – can begin to thaw even the frostiest relationships.

Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge are the authors of *Sibling Rivalry – Seven Simple Solutions* (Bantam Press, £12.99). www.KarenAndGeorgia.com