



Sibling rivalry is exceedingly common – and practically unavoidable

Sparring siblings

When it comes to family feuds, kinship and friendship are too often poles apart – especially between brother and sister.

By Josephine Brouard

DO YOU HAVE a good relationship with your siblings? It's amazing how many people *don't*. According to UK psychologist Judy Dunn, that could be because kids are sensitive to differences in parental treatment from a very young age. Parents think that their children don't notice the different ways a brother or sister is treated – but they're paying attention. According to Dunn's research, children start comparing parental responses to siblings as early as 17 months of age.

The result is the sort of friction many of us endure in the orbit of our grown-up brothers and sisters. My sister and I suffered a rivalry that dated back to our early teens; it took us more than 30 years to repair the damage we'd inflicted upon each other over the decades.

Even when we lived half a world apart and only saw each other every couple of years, we'd meet up and within days be arguing bitterly about absolute rubbish. It was just the "same old, same old" stuff from childhood rearing its stupid head yet again.

In *Mom Loves Me Best (And Other Lies You Told Your Sister)*, US self-help author Linda Sunshine writes that if you don't understand how a woman could love her sister dearly and want to wring her neck at the same time, then you're probably an only child.

Hmm, yes. I found it very difficult to understand where my little sister was coming from when she'd vent at me. Typically she'd talk herself down to the point that it felt like "I'm stupid" was her mantra. Yet, when it came to her looks, she'd exude a completely overbearing smugness. It wasn't until my aunt explained the degree to which my parents played up their elder daughter's brightness – and younger daughter's beauty – that the penny dropped.

Sydney psychologist Renée Mill believes sibling rivalry is exceedingly common – and practically unavoidable. "We humans are territorial by nature; each of us needs to find our space and feel that we are secure. The first child gets the whole 'gallon' of mother's milk, and when the second comes along, it feels like only half a gallon – and so on. But as a child grows in confidence and finds their niche in the world, comparisons are less likely to occur, and even become irrelevant. Once territories have been established, then sharing is made possible."

Mill could be talking about my sister and me. Fortunately, despite the damage we inflicted upon each other in our earlier years, we've enjoyed a wonderful rapprochement of late. The ageing and illness of our parents gave us a common purpose that united rather than divided us; also helpful were several holidays spent together that further enhanced and deepened the relationship.

Today I bask in the joy of excellent relationships with both my sister and brother – and I can honestly say that I look upon both as best friends. One of the highlights of my week, every week, for example, is meeting my brother at the gym to swim laps together after a stretch class. "Boet" (as I call him) and I yak for hours in the pool until we both get cold and exceedingly wrinkly.

There's an old Arabic saying that goes: "Me against my brother; me and my brother against our cousin; and me, my brother and my cousin against the stranger". Certainly, as I get older, wiser and wearier, I find the pull of family grows stronger. I may outgrow friends, but time with family members just gets easier.

And that's no surprise, when you consider that they are the people who know you best. In fact, it has been pointed out that siblings typically spend more time together when young than they do with their parents. We all know how powerful a parent's influence can be, so it's no wonder these formative experiences with siblings can also cut deep.

So if you can resolve the issues that cause you and your siblings to spar, let me encourage you to take the necessary steps. Who, after all, can watch your back as effectively as a loyal bro' or sis? ●

Josephine Brouard has a psychology degree and a fascination for human behaviour.