

Life

Thoughts and inspiration for your daily life



FAMILY

Three Ways to Curb Sibling Rivalry

Simple steps to a healthier home. *by* MATTHEW RUTTAN

If you have kids, you've probably thought about sibling rivalry. It's kind of like debt or a skin rash: You don't think about it until you have to deal with it yourself! Plus, parenting zips along so fast it's not like any of us have a week to lock ourselves in a library or attend a conference on parenting strategies. >

FAMILY, continued

To save you the trouble, I've pulled together a few tips I've heard from others, a few practices my wife and I have tried, and a few insights I've read. Hopefully they will help with a healthier, happier home.

1. Be Fair

The word "rivalry" suggests competition. And competition has to do with edging someone else out of the way so you can get a prize.

We compete for the first place ribbon because there's only one first place ribbon.

Sometimes kids try to compete for a parent's affection because they think it's in limited supply.

So be fair. Maybe you already are. If so, that's great. But make sure you are showing your children that you love and support them equally.

You need to be honest. Sometimes it's easier to show love to the child whose personality is most like yours. "Of course," you say to yourself, "I love them the same." I'm sure you do. But maybe you don't *show* it. Maybe you're subtly favouring the introvert. Or maybe you're only really encouraging to the one who likes the same sports as you. Just take a look at how you show your love. Are you consistent?

2. Build Team

Recently I was talking to a friend, Chantal Hewitt, about sibling rivalry. She said something I think is really insightful: "Something to always remind our children is that friends will come and go but siblings will always be there—to support them, love them, and be their best friend." Well said.

Chantal said it helps to teach children to focus on their siblings' successes and to prioritize the idea of "team" in the family. That naturally neutralizes rivalry. As she says it: "How can we

compete with those on our team?"

My wife Laura is also really good at this in our own home. A while ago she started the "I caught you!" chart. Basically when we catch any one of our three children doing something kind or helpful for one another, they get a sticker on the chart. When they reach 30 stickers we all go out for ice cream. (If you're a zombie and ice cream isn't your thing, or if your kids are older, just choose something else—maybe bowling or pizza.)

What we found is that they start to work with each other—and cheer for each other!—instead of competing. It's a huge team-builder.

Another way to build team is to assign chores and distribute them evenly. Kids need to learn that parents don't serve them, and that their siblings don't serve them. We all contribute to the family team.

Plus, a regular ritual of praying with and for siblings is a home run. Sometimes a prayer like "Help my sister deal with the mean boy at school" or "Make my brother's cut heal" hits an invisible switch in a child's mind that says we're all riding on the same bus.

3. Cultivate Gratitude

I passionately believe that gratitude is fertilizer for health in every area of your life. And it's true for your children, too.

In their new book, *Small Matters: How Churches and Parents Can Raise Up World-Changing Children*, Greg Nettle and Jimmy Mellado offer this perspective-shifting insight: "There are dangers and diseases that stem from poverty, and there are dangers and diseases that stem from prosperity." Wow.

And they know what they're talking about. Jimmy Mellado runs Compassion International, an organization that works to release children from

poverty around the world. In his own family, his kids partnered with children of similar ages in developing countries. I recently heard at the Orange Conference in Atlanta that "one of the best ways to convince a child or teen they are significant is to give them something significant to do."

When Mellado's children help, they feel significant. But it's more than that. They *are* helped significantly.


They argue that first-world kids are also "at risk." One of these risks is a prosperity side effect called ingratitude.

In your home, cultivate gratitude. This grows when children are somehow involved in serving others. It gives them perspective. Maybe it's sponsoring a child, handing out sandwiches, or cleaning up the neighbourhood.

It also happens when you make gratitude a habit. Why not have a gratitude conversation when you're eating dinner? Or maybe when you're bored in the car, start going around in a circle saying something you're thankful for. The first person who can't think of something has to fold the next load of laundry! And maybe if your kids catch you being ungrateful, you have to give them 25 cents. (Nothing like putting your money where your mouth is!)

A Healthier Home

Life can be messy. But that doesn't have to include frequent bowls of spaghetti dumped over one another's head. Unless, of course, you're into that.

So remember: When it comes to minimizing sibling rivalry, be fair, build "team" and cultivate gratitude, and you'll be taking your next best step to a healthier home. 

Rev. Matthew Ruttan is minister at Westminster, Barrie, Ont. He blogs at presbyterianrecord.ca.