RAISING CAIN

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN ACHIEVE A HAPPY SIBLING RELATIONSHIP

HERBERT S. STREAN, D.S.W., AND LUCY FREEMAN

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Herbert S. Strean
Lucy Freeman

PREFACE

Parents play an important part in the sibling relationship. Parents write much of the sibling script without being aware of it, and how parents handle the emotional outbursts, the stubbornness, or the complaints of siblings depends in part on the parents' own attitudes and feelings. This book will help parents to understand the complex sibling bond and will suggest practical solutions to common problems parents face in raising siblings. Our examples are taken from everyday life. As parents read this book they will be reminded of their own children, the children next door, and themselves as young siblings.

Occasionally, we will use examples from therapeutic work with children and their parents. It has been said that children and parents who need therapy are the same as those not in therapy—except more so. That is, all children have problems with sibling rivalry—the child in therapy may merely experience them more deeply. Similarly, all parents have their doubts and insecurities, angers, and ambivalences. Like so many things in life, it is merely a matter of degree.

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THE SIBLING'S DILEMMA

FRIEND OR ENEMY?

There is probably no more intense relationship than the sibling bond, except the bond between child and parent. Powerful feelings of both love and hate alternate, often swiftly, and brothers and sisters have to learn in their earliest years to control these intense feelings; to learn, in other words, what it took thousands of years for primitive man to learn—how to be civilized.

Torn by humankind's strongest emotions, not yet in full control of their feelings, siblings may help or hinder each other during the sometimes painful process of growing up. The full range of raw human emotions explode on the sibling scene, especially in the early years. The home is the setting in which both the most ardent ties of love are formed and the deepest hatreds simmer. The sibling slowly learns to accept both vio-

lent and loving desires, and becomes what adults call "socialized." Siblings may either help each other to accept the inherent difficulties of life or destroy each other's capacity to adjust to the demands of parents and society.

Not coincidentally, the first recorded sibling relationship, in the Bible, was one of rivalry and horror. Abel was murdered when Cain's jealousy overpowered him. This first rivalrous relationship has been reenacted in varying degrees, from controlled envy to uncontrollable fury often resulting in tragedy. But the sibling relationship is not only one of rivalry and revenge. There is also affection, friendship, dependency, protectiveness, generosity, and alliance against the parents. The sibling relationship contributes to the personality development of each sibling. The experiences between siblings can be enriching or constrictive, self-enhancing or self-destructive as the sibling travels through what Freud called "the human condition." Think of our many years of deep attachment to parents and siblings. We spend almost a quarter of our lives in the home where we grow up. No wonder the past remains so much a part of us, even when it lies buried in our unconscious, seemingly forgotten and often denied.

Because the sibling bond is so common, and so important, it is puzzling why both scientific and popular books about siblings have been so scarce. Many vital questions remain unanswered. How can the rivalry and envy of siblings be eased so siblings—and parents—may enjoy more family peace? How does the parents' relationship affect the siblings'? Is the only child happier than a child with siblings? How does the age of a child affect how he is influenced by his siblings? These are just a few of the questions we will raise over the course of this book.

No one wishes to be torn by such contradictory emotions as love and hate so much of the time. It is easier for both children and adults to deny their hate and jealousy. To understand the sibling relationship is to accept that we all possess contradictory feelings of love and hatred. It is a matter of the love being stronger than the hate so we can get along with others and, even more importantly, feel self-esteem. For hatred carries with it the shadow of guilt, which saps our confidence in ourselves.

Sibling hatred stems from the natural feelings in all children after the birth of a sibling as they lose the coveted position of the little prince or princess of the household. Adjusting to the newcomer serves as a small but important arena for learning to get along as adults in the real world. We all want to be special. As children, when we feel hungry we are fed, when we are upset or uncomfortable we are soothed, when we are sick we are given medicine and extra care. It is frustrating to grow up and to realize that life is not all milk and honey. To accept that we can never be king or queen for more than a day is not easy. Who enjoys being supplanted by a rival?

THE LIMITS OF SIBLING RIVALRY

Sometimes, sibling hatred can lead to ostracism. Sometimes it is short-lived. But it always exists to some degree. To deny the hatred is to give up the chance of easing it and of allowing love to prevail. What we face we can conquer.

Selma Fraiberg in *The Magic Years* talks of "the right to sibling rivalry." She encourages parents to protect those rights. But, she points out, the right to feel anger and resentment is not a license to inflict it on others. A child may have "the right to feel angry and to give expression to his feelings—within certain limits," but a child should not be permitted to strike younger children or his parents, or to use abusive language as verbal aggression. Fraiberg counsels, "A child can be permitted to express his anger without resorting to savage name-calling. If he does so, if he loses control, he needs to know from his parents that he has overstepped the line."

Physical attacks by siblings on each other are regarded by many parents as a natural accompaniment to family life. Fraiberg comments, "'Just as long as they don't murder each other,' parents may say indulgently. Yet I can think of no good reason why children beyond the nursery age should settle their differences through jungle tactics, and even in the nursery years we should begin the education away from physical attack."

She describes households where nine- and ten-year-old boys and girls continue a war that began the day a baby came home from the hospital. The quarrels of the older children were like the quarrels of toddlers. "She's sitting in my chair!" or, "He got a bigger piece of pie than I did!" The result: "Tears. Stamping of feet. A slap. Shrieks. A deadly battle is on."

Fraiberg suggests such behavior occurs because the older children are not required to give up "infantile forms of rivalry." Parents fail to intervene and prevent their children from attacking each other through verbal or subtler forms of aggression. As Fraiberg puts it, "In the name of sibling rivalry, children today are permitted extraordinary license in cruel name-calling and refined torments designed to undermine each other's personalities."

She cites the case of an older sister who made a career of depreciating the masculinity of a younger brother. She undermined his self-confidence with taunts, disparaging remarks, and cruel jokes. Her parents shrugged their shoulders, saying: "Brothers and sisters will fight, you know." They did not try to stop their daughter and help her overcome her envy and aggressive feelings toward her brother; instead they allowed her to continue to damage the development of his character.

THE UNDERLYING DILEMMA

The sibling relationship is a dilemma of conflicting feelings, a web of love merged with hate. One day the sibling is capable of great self-sacrifice for a brother or sister, while the next day he may unleash a verbal or physical attack on a sibling who has irritated or criticized him or of whom he is envious.

A fifteen-year-old boy praised his seventeen-year-old brother for his prowess on the basketball team. A few hours later, learning that his brother had been accepted by an Ivy League college, the younger sibling berated his older brother angrily, calling him arrogant and selfish, for no apparent reason. He obviously was jealous of his brother's academic success.

Similarly, a six-year-old girl, Melinda, describing her two-year-old sister, said, "She's cute and pretty," then added

thoughtfully, "But Mommy and Daddy love her better than me and I want to get rid of her." A few days later she grabbed a knife and walked menacingly toward her little sister. Fortunately, her parents stopped her in time from inflicting any wound.

Melinda loved her sister but hated her too. This universal sibling conflict is difficult for a child to face and resolve. Every child has to live with intense feelings of love and hate for each person in the famiy. As a ten-year-old girl said to a friend about her eight-year-old brother, "He's my darling when he's nice to me, but I hate him when he hits me."

Parents can reduce sibling hatred by starting with the premise that anger is inevitable and that siblings have a right to feel anger. Paradoxically, parents who want to curb sibling rivalry and hatred must first accept that children have a right to feel it.

When Melinda's parents helped her accept and face her anger, her murderous feelings gradually diminished. Often, when parents observe a child acting provocatively and cruelly toward a sibling, the angry child is asking for limits, for controls, for structure. Frequently, a fist-fight between siblings, or hostile name-calling, is a disguised cry for help. Parents who observe their children fighting would do well to convey two feelings to the children: that the parents understand the anger and resentment and accept it as normal, and that, nevertheless, the parents cannot allow one child to hurt another with acts or words.

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS EXCLUSIVE LOVE

Sometime in the early years siblings have to accept the impossibility of obtaining the exclusive love of a parent. A parent may feel more love for one child than for another, but there is usually some degree of love bestowed on each sibling. As siblings realize and accept this, their hostility eases and they are able to acknowledge that each of them will be loved

for his or her own qualities and achievements. They do not need to live in constant anger, feeling unloved.

One father told his twelve-year-old daughter, who was envious of her ten-year-old brother, "I don't expect you to be perfect. I get angry at times too. But I do expect you to share my love, and your mother's love, with your brother. You cannot demand exclusive right to it. We are a family. We should be able to live together in harmony, helping each other, not tearing each other down."

He was telling his daughter that he loved her, but that he also loved her brother and that she should not expect all his love. He was also asking her to give up some of her self-love. He was saying, in essence, that love has to be learned, and that she had to learn to relinquish some of her selfishness and become a cooperative member of the family.

There may be initial jealousy and rivalry when the older child finds himself displaced by younger siblings, but when his hostile feelings turn into friendly ones in the interest of getting along with the other family members, the jealous hatreds are forgotten.

One of the important issues in the sibling relationship is learning to share. They share parents. They share possessions, sometimes even clothes. They may share the same bedroom, the same closet, the same bathroom. It is difficult to give up the childhood wish to "have it all." Sharing stirs emotions of envy, competition, and hostility—feelings that are difficult to acknowledge and painful to accept.

But, siblings do learn to share, to their later advantage. In fact, if they go away to college they feel lonely, yearning for their brothers or sisters. College sororities and fraternities would not exist if the lonely student did not seek a replacement for the lost sibling. (The members even refer to themselves as "brothers" and "sisters.") Some colleges and universities that prohibit fraternities and sororities provide what is called the "house plan," where students find a home away from home, complete with "siblings."

However, the activities of fraternities and sororities also show siblings' mixed emotions. Though the members are nominally brothers or sisters who pledge to support each other, they will, at times, hurt each other, even commit sadistic pranks, sometimes even accidentally maim or kill a member in

initiation rites. Fraternities and sororities reflect in microcosm what goes on among real brothers and sisters: an intense love and loyalty, but also hatred and the desire to hurt.

THE PARENTS' EXAMPLES

It is a truism that all children are extremely vulnerable, their feelings are easily hurt. The psychic wounds of the earliest years are the ones that cause emotional damage. At the same time there can be a happy medium in solving the inevitable conflicts of sibling rivalry. Each child must be helped to respect the other, to refrain from attacks on self-esteem. In a family where respect for all the members is low, there will be little harmony between siblings.

Giving up the pleasures of infancy, which are selfish pleasures for the most part, is not easy. But when parents show in their own relationship that cooperation is enjoyable and brings the reward of friendship, siblings learn to love each other more than they hate each other.

Siblings can have an enjoyable, easy, relationship which lays the foundation for future relationships outside the home. But, they need their parents to show the way. Siblings, no matter what their age, are helpless when it comes to giving up the fantasy that they are perfect and that all their demands should be met. Parents must show that adjusting to society's demands will bring the greatest reward—love.

To help siblings share, parents need to be convinced that sharing is commendable. How much parents share with each other serves as a model for their children. If parents compete rather than share, their children will compete rather than share. One of the reasons both adults and children become hesitant about sharing is that they believe sharing means giving up something. They feel that if they share, they will have less pleasure. If they share toys, they will have fewer possessions. If they share parents, they will have less love. Parents need to emphasize that sharing makes life fuller and happier. If a brother shares a toy with his sister, the pleasure of both increase. There is joy in sharing, self-hatred in selfishness. No one likes a selfish person. The giver is always welcome.

In the next chapter, we will explore further the idea that parents in large part, set the tone for the siblings' relationships.

A minister sought help when his eighteen-year-old son was caught stealing a car. The minister was very upset as he described how his son was taken to the police station after driving a neighbor's car out of the yard. The neighbor had chased him in another car and caught him. But the therapist noticed how excited the minister became as he described the chase with a gleam of pleasure in his eyes.

"Part of you seems to have gotten a kick out of what your son did," the therapist remarked.

At first, the minister strongly denied this. But, a few sessions later he told the therapist he now agreed that he had vicariously enjoyed his son's crime and had wanted him to get away with it rather than be caught and punished. The minister said with a half-smile, "I guess the pious, law-abiding side of me occasionally would like to be defeated by a more wanton part."

"We all feel that way," the therapist reassured him. "We learn to repress our primitive wishes, like the wish to steal what we covet. But the wishes always exist and at times may conquer our wish to obey the law."

The therapist helped the minister understand that his son had sensed these wishes to rebel and had carried them into action. An understanding judge granted the son probation on condition he receive therapy, a decision the boy's father heartily endorsed.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PARENT'S SIBLINGS

A physical education teacher was worried about his son. The father was upset because his son was a poor athlete and shy with his peers. He realized he was embarrassed to acknowledge that he, an athletic, virile man who had many friends, was rearing a son who was emerging as the antithesis of all his ideals. The father recalled his brother, two years older, whom he had always envied and resented. This brother had

become a well-known lawyer for a large movie corporation in Los Angeles and lived in a lavish home in Beverly Hills. The brother had surpassed him when they were in high school on the baseball field, in the classroom, and evidently in all else. As he faced his feelings of envy, competition, and resentment toward his brother, he became aware that what he was doing to his son was what he had wished to do to his brother—demean him, cut him down, and kill his competitive spirit.

Parents sometimes treat a child like a rival of both the present (taking the mother's love away from the father, or the father's love away from the mother) and of the past (one of the parent's own siblings who took away a mother's or father's love). This father had been unconsciously trying to emotionally demolish his son as he had wished, as a boy, to demolish his successful older brother. Consciously, he wanted his son to be the winner he himself never was. But a stronger desire—to destroy his enemy of years past who, he believed, had kept him from being a winner—caused him to treat his son with contempt. Contempt may be more painful to a child than a slap across the face. Many sons of athletes turn out to be nonathletes. The father has converted his son into an opponent of the past, usually a rivalrous sibling, but a rival he can now defeat. In fantasy the father has become the sibling he envied, no longer his inferior self. He has used his son to turn childhood defeat into adult victory. The powerful wishes, hurts, and envies of the past can seek resolution and revenge in the present if we are not aware of our hidden fantasies and the intense emotions still struggling within.

The more successfully parents can face their hidden resentments, the less resentful a child they will have. One of the reasons it is difficult for parents to accept their own resentments is that they judge themselves too harshly. Just as sibling rivalry is a universal phenomenon, parental resentment also is, and should not be harshly condemned. When parents accept their resentments from both the past and present and share them with their spouses, the less judgmental they will be and less resentment will appear in their children.

A mother brought Alice, her six-year-old daughter, for therapy. Alice had suddenly started to regress, after the birth of a sister. Alice demanded that she be diapered, sucked her thumb, wet her bed, and indulged in baby talk. Such regres-

sion is not unusual at the birth of a sibling, as the older child tries to compete with the seemingly favored arrival.

The mother told the therapist that she had a younger sister to whom she did not speak and had always disliked. She also described how she felt when her sister was born and how she, like Alice, had started sucking her thumb again, wetting her pants, and speaking baby talk. The hate she felt toward her younger sister was communicated unconsciously to her older daughter. The mother had accepted, as inevitable, mutual hatred between the siblings. Such powerful feelings from the past can be like blueprints for building present emotional structures.

A thirty-five-year-old mother confessed to her therapist that she felt distant and remote from her twelve-year-old son. "He's a handsome boy and very bright," she said. "But I feel as though I must hold back all signs of love. What's the matter with me? I hate myself for not being more affectionate."

She remembered that as a girl she was "madly in love" with her older, very handsome, charming brother. She confessed she had sexual fantasies about him while growing up. She had transferred this guilty love for her brother to her equally handsome son and then, to protect herself from these uncomfortable feelings, kept a discreet physical distance from him. This is another way parents transfer the feelings about their siblings onto their children.

Many fathers hold back warm feelings toward their daughters because they unconsciously view them as the sisters whom they wanted to hug, kiss, and love sexually. They fantasize that if they kiss their daughters, even innocently, they are kissing their *verboten* sisters.

A little girl of eight was heartbroken when her father suddenly stopped allowing her to sit on his lap and withdrew from her when she wanted to hug and kiss him. He said sternly, "You're too old for that nonsense." He felt guilty because he was transferring to her the sensual feelings he had felt, as a boy, for his beautiful older sister. He had even named his daughter after this sister, and he now transferred the love to his daughter.

Often parents, when they face the fact that they have fantasized their child as a sibling, feel more comfortable in bestow-