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Siblings Without Rivalry

HOW TO HELP YOUR
CHILDREN LIVE TOGETHER
SO YOU CAN LIVE TOO

By Adele Faber
& Elaine Mazlish

Authors of
HOW TO TALK SO KIDS WILL LISTEN
& LISTEN SO KIDS WILL TALK

"HAVE I GOT A BOOK FOR YOU! RUN, DON'T WALK,
TO YOUR NEAREST BOOKSTORE." Ann Landers

Siblings Without Rivalry

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Adele Faber
& Elaine Mazlish

Illustrations by Kimberly Ann Coe

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To all the grown-up siblings
who still have a
hurt child inside them.

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“Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brothers
and sisters to dwell together in unity.”

The Book of Psalms

We'd Like To Thank . . .

Our husbands, for their ongoing support and encouragement of this project. They were a daily source of strength to us, especially when the going was slow.

Each of our offspring, who as young children provided us with the raw material for this book and who, as young adults, gave us valuable suggestions about what we might have done differently.

The parents in our groups for their willingness to explore with us and try out this "new approach" with their children. Their experiences and insights enrich these pages.

All the people who shared, on tape, their past and present feelings about their brothers and sisters.

Kimberly Ann Coe, our artist, who somehow was able to sense exactly what we were after in our cartoon illustrations, and create a lovable cast of parents and children.

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Patricia King, dear friend, for bringing her special sensibilities to the reading of our manuscript.

And finally, the late Dr. Haim Ginott, who gave us our first vision of how the flames of sibling rivalry could be reduced to a small, safe flicker.

How This Book Came To Be

As we were writing *How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*, we ran into trouble. The chapter on sibling rivalry was getting out of hand. We were only halfway through, and it was already over a hundred pages long. Desperately we went to work to shorten, tighten, eliminate—anything to get it into proportion with the rest of the book. But the more we cut, the more unhappy we became.

Gradually the truth dawned on us. To do justice to sibling rivalry, we'd have to give it a book of its own. Once that decision was made, the rest fell into place. We would put into *How To Talk* . . . enough material on handling conflicts to ease parents over the roughest spots. But in our "sibling book" we would have room to stretch out, to tell about our early frustrations with our own battling kids; to describe the eye-opening principles we learned from the late child psychologist, Dr. Haim Ginott, in the years that we were part of his parent group; to share the insights we gained from our families, our reading, and our endless discussions with each other; and to describe the experiences of the parents who took part in the workshops we subsequently created and conducted on sibling rivalry.

It also occurred to us that we had an unusual opportunity through our nationwide speaking engagements to find out what parents around the country felt about sibling problems. We soon discovered we had a hot topic on our hands. Wherever we went, the very mention of the words "sibling rivalry" triggered an immediate and intense reaction.

"The fighting drives me up the wall."

"I don't know what'll happen first. Either they'll kill each other or I'll kill them."

"I get along fine with each child individually, but when the two of them are together, I can't stand either one of them."

Evidently the problem was widespread and deeply felt. The more we talked to parents about what went on between their children, the more we were reminded of the dynamics that produced such high levels of stress in their homes. Take two kids in competition for their parents' love and attention. Add to that the envy that one child feels for the accomplishments of the other; the resentment that each child feels for the privileges of the other; the personal frustrations that they don't dare let out on anyone else *but* a brother or sister, and it's not hard to understand why in families across the land, the sibling relationship contains enough emotional dynamite to set off rounds of daily explosions.

We wondered, "Was there anything to be said on behalf of sibling rivalry? It certainly wasn't good for parents. Was there something about it that might be good for children?"

Everything we read made a case for the uses of some conflict between brothers and sisters: From their struggles to establish dominance over each other, siblings become tougher and more resilient. From their endless rough-housing with each other, they develop speed and agility. From their verbal sparring they learn the difference between being clever and being hurtful. From the normal irritations of living together, they learn how to assert themselves, defend themselves, compromise. And sometimes, from their envy of each other's spe-

cial abilities, they become inspired to work harder, persist and achieve.

That's the best of sibling rivalry. The worst of it, as parents were quick to tell us, could seriously demoralize one or both of the children and even cause permanent damage. Since our book was going to be concerned with preventing and repairing any kind of damage, we felt that it was important to look once again at the causes of the constant competition among siblings.

Where does it all begin? The experts in the field seem to agree that at the root of sibling jealousy is each child's deep desire for the *exclusive* love of his parents. Why this craving to be the one and only? Because from Mother and Father, that wondrous source, flow all things the child needs to survive and thrive: food, shelter, warmth, caresses, a sense of identity, a sense of worth, of specialness. It is the sunlight of parental love and encouragement that enables a child to grow in competence and slowly gain mastery over his environment.

Why wouldn't the presence of other siblings cast a shadow upon his life? They threaten everything that is essential to his well-being. The mere existence of an additional child or children in the family could signify LESS. Less time alone with parents. Less attention for hurts and disappointments. Less approval for accomplishments. And most frightening of all, the thought: "If Mom and Dad are showing all that love and concern and enthusiasm for my brother and sister, maybe they're worth more than me. And if they are worth more, that must mean that I'm worth less. And if I am worth less, then I'm in serious trouble."

No wonder children struggle so fiercely to be *first* or *best*. No wonder they mobilize all their energy to have *more* or *most*. Or better still, ALL. Security lies in having all of Mommy, all of Daddy, all the toys, all the food, all the space.

What an incredibly difficult task parents confront! They have to find the ways to reassure each child that he or she is

safe, special, beloved; they need to help the young antagonists discover the rewards of sharing and cooperation; and somehow they have to lay the groundwork so that the embattled siblings might one day see each other as a source of pleasure and support.

How were parents coping with this heavy responsibility? In order to find out, we devised a brief questionnaire.

Is there anything you do with your children that seems to help their relationship?

Is there anything you do that seems to make it worse?

Do you remember what your parents did that increased the hostility between you and your siblings?

Did they ever do anything that decreased the hostility?

We also asked about how they got along with their siblings when they were young, how they get along now, and what areas they'd like to see covered in a book on sibling rivalry.

At the same time we interviewed people personally. We taped hundreds of hours of conversations with men, women and children of diverse backgrounds ranging in age from three to eighty-eight.

Finally we gathered together all our materials, old and new, and ran several groups of eight sessions each on sibling rivalry alone. Some of the parents in these groups were enthusiastic right from the start; some were skeptical ("Yeah, but you don't know *my* kids!"); and some were at their wits' end, ready to try anything. All of them participated actively—taking notes, asking questions, role-playing in class and bringing back to each other the results of their experiments in their home "laboratories."

From all these sessions and from all the work we had done in the years before comes this book, the affirmation of our belief that we, as parents, *can* make a difference.