

Oh Brother! Managing Sibling Rivalries

by Phyllis Kramer Hirschkop
[More About Phyllis...](#)

The last thing aging parents need is children who can't work together to help them. Most elderly people get the assistance from their children that they need and desire. But often they don't. And when they don't their welfare often suffers and they spend the last years of their lives involved in troubles that, we all admit, they ought to be free of—the unresolved conflicts between their children. When those conflicts exist, parents' interests take second place to their children's own emotional problems. That shouldn't be.

Sibling rivalries interfere with helping elder parents in a number of ways. They make it difficult to get all family members to participate in problem solving and even more difficult to get them to agree on a plan of action to assist parents in need. Discussions about possible courses of action break down, and the parents' care becomes another issue over which they can fight. Children continue to act as if it's more important to triumph over the envied or resented sister or brother than to do what's best for the parents. When an adult child feels that one of his or her siblings has always been the favorite, he or she is more likely to resist helping the parents. Why not let the favorite child do it all since he or she will get the credit from mom or dad regardless of what the other children do? The hurt and resentment of not feeling loved and respected is as present today as it may have been long ago in childhood. Even with the best of intentions toward parents, when someone is filled with negative feelings toward his or her siblings it's difficult to focus on the parents and make clear-headed decisions about their care.

A Concrete Example

Two sisters and a brother have been at odds with each other since they were children. Their parents had frequent arguments with each other that included their mother throwing things and threatening to leave her husband and the children. After these arguments, their mother would be withdrawn and sullen and leave the children to fend for themselves. At other times she would pit them against each other. Always, there was one winner and two losers. This could change in the blink of an eye, so that there was no security in holding the winner's position. The children thought this was their mother's way of meting out love, and so they rose to the bait. All three quickly learned that they had to knock the others out of the game to win her favor.

Their father was a remote person who spent most of his time at work. When he was at home, he'd retreat to his study and have little to do with his children. They felt that their parents were self-absorbed and not able to provide the love and attention they craved. Instead of turning toward each other for support, they took their frustrations out on each other by bickering and fighting, and this pattern continued into their adulthood.

Several years after the death of their father, they were faced with having to make a decision about their mother's care. As the result of mini strokes, she has fallen several times and wasn't able to get up after the last two falls. The oldest sister, who lives in the same town as the mother, has because of her proximity become the primary caregiver. She resents this role since her mother is never satisfied with what she does. Although her mother has always been critical of her, she has continued to try to please her, with the hope of finding favor in her mother's eyes. The middle sister, who lives several hours away by car, alternates

between fighting with her mother and taking her side against her sister. A brother who lives a plane ride away has little contact with his mother and yet is her favorite.

One day the oldest sister received a call from her mother's doctor suggesting that it was no longer safe for her mother to continue living alone. She immediately called to inform her sister and brother. They each knew that their mother didn't want to leave her home and that it would, under the best of circumstances, be difficult to convince her otherwise. The tension among the three of them began with the question of who was going to tell her and then what they would do. The sisters began immediately to disagree about what could and should be done. Their brother, as usual, faded into the background, which then gave the sisters an excuse to turn on him and accuse him of always leaving everything to them. This became a perfect opportunity once again to play out their conflicts with each other. During this period they spent so much time and energy disagreeing with each other that their mother had a serious fall, broke her hip, and needed to be hospitalized. They now faced a real crisis. The hospital social worker recommended a rehab facility and then an assisted living residence for their mother. They were still in disagreement about whether she should go home with 24-hour nursing care or go to rehab and then go to an assisted living residence. The social worker, seeing that the children couldn't even discuss the alternatives without arguing, suggested outside counseling to help them set aside their difficulties with each other for the more important goal of making an appropriate decision for their mother.

Old Roles and Frustrations

The members of this family, without realizing it, were recreating old family roles and feeling the same frustrations and resentments they had felt years earlier. During stressful times--and caring for a needy parent is surely stressful--people tend to regress to old, child-like behavior. In families such as this one, negative feelings among family members trigger a regression to childhood emotions because these siblings have not learned to deal with each other in a more constructive way. This time, however, their mother was the one suffering the consequences. Had they been able to cooperate with each other to make a decision earlier, it is more likely their mother would have been in a safer environment where she was less likely to break her hip.

Adult sibling relationships tend to mirror earlier relationships. The contact among siblings usually decreases during young adulthood when each person tends to have individual friends, interests, and careers. As studies have repeatedly shown, in positive sibling relationships the contact between sisters, especially those living in close proximity, tends to increase with age, more so than among brothers and sisters, which in turn increases more than among brothers alone. However, where jealousy and envy have existed in childhood, they tend to continue, or if there has been some hiatus siblings rivalries, pick up again. The rivalries may be over who has the more prestigious job, who earns more money, whose spouse earns more money, or who has the larger house and the smarter, more attractive children. All of them get in the way of helping parents.

Sibling relationships are longer lasting than any other relationships in our lives. They outlast the connection with parents, spouses, and children. Sisters and brothers can be constant figures in each other's lives when they get along well or objects of avoidance where there are negative feelings between them. What helps to determine the direction they take is multifaceted and complicated. Positive sibling relationships tend to exist when parents are physically and emotionally present and can create a loving

atmosphere in which the child can develop with encouragement, guidance, and limit setting.

Parents can unwittingly fuel rivalry among their children in many ways. In the case of the two sisters and brother, the father was remote and the mother was moody and played her children off against each other, which left them feeling that there was an insufficient amount of love to go around. They naturally vied for what was available. Another way in which parents can unwittingly fuel rivalry is when parents are disappointed in their children. They have expectations of what the children are going to be like, but the young family members may not live up to those expectations. There are parents who clearly favor one child above another for any number of reasons, such as fit of personality or over-identification with one child. There are parents who unknowingly encourage conflict or avoid it at all costs. Much of the encouraging or discouraging of conflict is unconscious although potentially within a parent's control to change.

Factors outside a parent's control can also have a traumatic effect on children. The illness or loss of a parent or grandparent, a job change which requires a move, or a divorce can be the cause of children feeling anxious, hurt, or lost. This is particularly true when one or both parents are not available to provide the attention, comfort, and security the children need. When there isn't enough of those basic human needs to go around, children vie for the smaller portions that are available.

Two fraternal twin sisters lived with their mother after she divorced their father because of his drinking and irresponsibility as a husband and father. Their mother went into a two-year-long depression. The 10-year-old girls tried to take care of their mother. Their father rarely came by, and no close family friends existed to help. The daughters faced hard times financially and emotionally. From the age of 10 through adolescence and into their adulthood, the sisters fought. Their fighting was the way they could get their mother's attention. This pattern of conflict between the sisters continued into their adulthood although they were professionally successful, had established solid marriages, and lived satisfying lives.

When their mother was 80, she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and needed round-the-clock care. Each sister had a different idea of what should be done and rejected, out of hand, the suggestions of the other. By the time they sought help, even they could see that their relationship had gotten out of hand. They were fighting an ancient battle while their mother's care was flagging.

When Intervention Is Necessary

When siblings like these cannot work cooperatively, it's important to involve someone who can act as a facilitator, or "coach," between the warring parties. And one of the most effective and proven ways to address such family conflicts is a family meeting under the facilitator's guidance. For best results the meeting should be inclusive so that not only the siblings but their spouses, adult children, and those other family members who wish to participate in the elderly parent's care are invited to attend. No one should be left out for being difficult, or a trouble-maker, or always finding fault with whatever anyone else proposes. Whenever appropriate, the parents also need to be present so that they can express their needs and desires. It's important to remember that although the siblings need to do some work among themselves to put aside angry and hurt feelings, they are there for their parents and not for themselves.

The first task of a family meeting is to define why everyone is there, figure out what the parent's needs are, and then have members offer possible solutions. If the problem is a parent who needs 24-hour-a-day help,

it's important to find out, if possible, what the parent's preferences are. In the example of the twins whose parent is suffering from Alzheimer's disease, the adult children face wrenching decisions about their parent's care and their own involvement. In such a case, the parent's participation may be limited if it isn't non-existent. Other family members who know the person well may be able to contribute information that will help to determine whether an assisted-living facility or home health care service would be preferable.

Among all participants in such a family conference, honesty is essential—even if it is often difficult to summon, given the nature of their relationships. For example, if one of the twin sisters were to state that she can't bear to see her mother like this and wants to spend as little time with her as possible, it might be possible to accommodate her request. It might mean that, instead of having to deal directly with her mother, she instead take charge of dealing with her finances or be the intermediary between the family and the professional care providers the sisters employ to care for their ill parent.

When the other twin listens to how her sister feels about their mother's condition, the twin who is expressing her thoughts feels like she's being taken seriously. This expression of ideas and preferences helps in dividing up the tasks of caring for their mother in a reasonable and fair way and at the same time accommodates each one's preferences.

Meeting Needs With Outside Resources

Once the parent's needs are defined during a family conference, the next step is to figure out how to meet these needs. It's important to remember that there are outside resources that can fill some of the needs, such as Meals on Wheels and services that transport elderly people to doctor's appointments. The two sisters and the wider network of friends and family do not have to do it all. The hardest work of the meeting is to stay focused and address the parent's needs. It's understandable that, when animosity is present, the route to decision making may be circuitous. When the sisters lose focus because of old negative feelings, they are unable to do what they're there to do—help to make decisions about the care of the needy parent. When these feelings become insurmountable blocks to progress, the meeting facilitator is there to help them stay on tasks.

Court dockets are filled with cases of people who have chosen contentious rather than conciliatory ways of trying to work out family problems. Feelings of anger and hostility are a drain on the siblings' emotional resources, which are needed to find solutions to the parent's living arrangements. When there is rivalry among siblings, the need to help their parents can be an opportunity to establish a different kind of relationship based on a shared heritage and a common goal. By coming together and acknowledging the past hurts and dealing with each other in the present, it's possible to attend to the reason they've gotten together—to resolve their parents' living situation. This goal requires listening to each other with an open mind, a willingness to explore possibilities, and a desire to carry out one's duty to one's parents. The overarching reason is to perpetuate the continuity of the family for generations to come.