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Managing sibling rivalry with children who have suffered trauma - By Sarah Naish (Excerpt from The Therapeutic Parents' Companion, An A-Z of Strategies and Solutions due for publication 2018)

Sibling rivalry with children who have developmental trauma is NOTHING like 'normal' sibling rivalry. Few statements are more irritating to a therapeutic parent, struggling with sibling rivalry, than 'all children do that,' or similar. The rivalry we see between our children is literally a fight for survival. It is often early, learnt behaviour with strong foundations in visceral fear and jealousy. It differs from standard sibling rivalry with securely attached children, in its intensity, relentlessness and longevity. For this reason, siblings are very often separated because it is felt that most parents cannot manage the diverse behaviours, competitiveness and rivalry. Having raised five adopted full siblings myself, I hold the view that it is almost always best to keep the children together, BUT the correct level of experience, respite and individual attention must be part of the support package.

What it looks like-

- Children compete to 'be the best', win etc
- Children compete at a violent level for adult attention
- Children compete and fight for space such as car places, table etc
- Children take each other's possessions
- Children argue almost constantly
- Children hurt each other, sometimes seriously
- Children perceive that they get less than other siblings, parent is 'unfair' etc

Why it might happen-

- A fight for survival, recreating early childhood patterns, especially where there was abuse/neglect
- Fear of invisibility -In particular the need for others to notice the child

above the other children- especially when the other children might be getting attention for positive OR negative behaviours

- One or more children need to feel powerful and in control
- Rewards child with a reaction- (trigger for parent responding to the rivalry, I.E. refereeing)
- Recreating a familiar environment – I.E. Older children behaving as the parent.
- One child feels the need to 'protect' the parent from the needs of the other children.

Preventative Strategies-

- Put in place cast iron rules and boundaries, which lower the children's anxiety and reassure them of an equal status. For example; each child has a 'turn' at favourite activities and this is not changed.
- Ensure places are protected. Make sure each child has designated places at the table, in the car and even in the lounge.
- Make mealtimes structured if necessary, with everyone being given a turn to speak. (See competitiveness).
- Put in place 'special time' for each child. This can be 10 minutes alone with the parent each day at a set time, or one evening or afternoon out with one parent once a month. This can be difficult with large sibling groups of 4+ but if you enlist the help of one other person the task is more easily shared.
- Make sure each child is easily able to protect their own property from others or can escape if needed. We used locking door handles on bedrooms so the children could go in and turn the handle, preventing others from entering. (Naturally we always kept a spare key)!
- Avoid comparing the children to each other. Even in a positive way!
- Remind the children of any previous physical reminders you have made around fairness. (see 'Strategies after').
- Minimise or remove physical barriers which prevent supervision. Our children's arguing and fighting escalate when the parent leaves the room to make dinner. This is not a coincidence. (We knocked down the wall between the kitchen and lounge).

Strategies During-

- Sibling rivalry can be a constant theme, rather than a specific incident. If this is the case in your house, then pick the main issue you want to deal with first and stick with that one!
- Check yourself when tempted to referee. Think about what would happen if you did not intervene. Often the behaviour is about getting us to mediate. The more we do, the worse it gets. Making statements such as, 'I am sure you are able to work this out for yourselves,' can be empowering for the children and remind them that you have them in mind.
- Do not be tempted to have long, logical conversations with the children. Remember that the rivalry may literally feel like a fight for survival for the child, and they are probably not regulated enough to be able to think things through rationally during an incident.
- Use 'wondering aloud' to let the child know you have seen what is happening and to help to explore alternative outcomes. 'I wonder if you are pushing each other because you want my attention?'
- State what you know in a matter of fact way, to let them know what is going on. This is also really effective where you have a 'hand grenade child' who is causing trouble. I.E. 'I can see you just took your sister's book and hid it and that's why she punched you.'
- You can also use empathic commentary where hurtful things are said or done to try to move anger to sadness. Anger is usually unexpressed sadness, and the sad feelings are much easier for us to help the children to resolve; 'It must be really sad to feel like you hate your brother, when you have already both had such a tough time.'
- Use empathic commentary to draw attention to the child's actions and effect on their sibling. For example, where there has been violence. 'Look at your sister's face. Can you see the tears in her eyes? She is crying because she is hurt and scared.'
- Tell the child/ren that if they continue doing x then the consequence will be Y. If you cannot think of the natural or life consequence in the moment, then state that there will be a consequence which you will let them know later. I.E. In 'William Wobbly and the Mysterious Holey Jumper' Sophie Spikey deliberately breaks William Wobbly's elastic band. Mum tells Sophie that it is a shame she did that and will have to think of a way to make it up to William later. Later that day, when it is 'job time', Mum reallocates William's job to Sophie.
- If safe to do so, simply walk away. Removing the audience can be very powerful. You can explain that your ears are full up with all the noise and will return when they have recovered. If possible, go out into the garden, focus on a different sound and sights to free your mind. It's amazing how simple this strategy can be to help us to re frame.

Strategies After-

- Revisit any particularly negative incidents once the children are calm. Now is the time to talk through how everyone felt. Occasionally you will get a breakthrough. Usually you may see an escalation and more accusing, so be careful to pick the right moment/incident!
- When you feel upset and exhausted by constant fighting and arguing, instead of spending your energy always diffusing and refereeing, plan to leave the house so you have respite. You may not be able to stop the arguing and fighting for a very long time, so it's important to build in recovery time. • Use 'showing sorry' to help the children put things right.
- Think about what led to any particularly bad incidents and consider changing visibility, structure or routine to prevent a reoccurrence.
- Where there has been an incident with a child saying 'It's not fair! X always gets more than me' etc. Do a list to compare what each sibling has had. Make sure the complainer's list is longest. Then later on show this to the complainer and say, 'I was thinking about what you said, so I decided to write down what I remembered.' Show the child the list. You can then also use this as a preventative strategy next time by reminding the child of the list.

Footnote: I used to do a structured time out for everyone including self. Now before you all gasp in horror and say, 'TP doesn't use time out!'..... it wasn't possible in those moments to have five arguing children doing time in! So, we ALL went to our rooms or safe place to help feel calm then met in neutral place to 'reflect'. I enjoyed these moments of time out for me I must admit. So even if the arguing immediately started again, I had had a little respite recharge.