

Siblings Without Rivalry

**How to stop the fighting &
enhance family harmony**

by AMY ROTHENBERG, ND, DHANP

WHEN COUPLES SET OUT TO BEGIN FAMILIES, it is often with the idea that there will be several children and that these relationships will somehow be lovely. In many cases, this comes true and the friendship and camaraderie between brothers and sisters is formative, supportive, and lifelong.





Just as often, however, things backfire. Subsequent children born into families wreak havoc with older siblings, and parents find themselves playing referee and arbitrator all day long. As children get older, sometimes patterns in relating shift; but often they do not. Instead they may escalate, and time at home with siblings especially on weekends or summer vacations can be unbearable for all. The screaming, hate-filled arguments, hitting, and other aggressive actions complicate and stress family dynamics.

Reason for hope

Most parents are at a loss for how to handle such situations—preventively, in the moment of flaring emotions, and after things calm down. Unfortunately, well-meaning parents often make matters worse. Sibling rivalry can be difficult for parents and children alike, especially for those who don't handle discord well. In

Charming Daisy

When I first met Daisy I was blown away by her charm. At age four, she could talk to anyone. She flashed a gorgeous white smile at my receptionist, offered to help both older and younger kids in the waiting room play area, and gave me a big hug upon being introduced. She was chubby, almost Rubenesque—if you can use that word to describe a preschooler! Her long blond hair, pulled back into a high ponytail, swung behind her like another limb. Her rosy cheeks came to a central point in her red and full lips. She was flirty, confident, and amazingly robust.

The chief complaints Daisy's mom had written on her daughter's intake form were: asthma, jealousy, behavior issues, and violence. It was difficult for me to reconcile the bright little girl before me with the notion of behavior problems. She seemed so cute, outgoing, helpful, effusive, and capable. I had watched her herd together her family's

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many families, we see separate televisions and/or computers to keep kids apart. Or we find each person over-scheduled so that time at home together is minimized. But solutions like that deny a family the opportunity to work together, to learn basic communication skills, and to gain the ability to work out differences, not to mention having family relationships that are loving and enjoyable. In my experience both as a physician and as a mother who raised three children, I can say without hesitation: there *is* help, there *are* solutions to such major family problems, and there is plenty of reason for *hope*.

With correct homeopathic constitutional prescribing along with conscious parenting techniques, especially when begun early and kept up, diabolical sibling rivalry can be transformed. Perhaps not into a peaceful, loving, picture-postcard family, but one where communication and respect are primary and where time together, at least more often than not, can be tolerated or even enjoyed.

belongings, and like an ant, she seemed to carry more than her own weight as they made their way back to my exam room. Meanwhile, Daisy's seven-year-old sister Lisa, who was skinny and pale with small features, sat quietly and almost passively at her mother's side, not taking up much space nor manifesting much energy.

According to Daisy's mom, problems between Daisy and Lisa started in Daisy's infancy; it seemed that almost as soon as Daisy became aware of her surroundings, she did not want her sister around. When Daisy was nursing, if Lisa, then three, came over to ask her mother a question, Daisy would bat at Lisa and shoo her away. As Daisy got older and more physically able, she would hit or kick her sister. She wanted her mother's attention to be complete and uninterrupted. If her mom would even *talk* to Lisa across the playroom while Daisy was at the breast, Daisy would clamp down on the nipple and start pummeling her mother. At first, most people thought this was somehow endear-

ing, but Daisy's mother began to worry almost right away. Comparing notes with other parents, she learned that Daisy's behavior was unusual; they told her that their older children were more likely to be jealous of the younger one, not vice versa.

In general, I would agree with this observation. When a child is born *into* a family, they more or less accept their position. That said, someone with a very strong personality can seemingly come into this life with their own agenda. Daisy's was clear: pay attention to me and me only. Funny thing was, she loved her sister and always wanted to play with her; as long as Lisa went along with Daisy's plans, everything went fine.

Tantrums and time-outs

In addition to the jealousy issue, Daisy hit the terrible twos with force and passion, and she had not outgrown them even with committed parents who set limits and stuck to them. Her parents instituted "time-outs" right before she turned two—but it didn't seem to work. Daisy was still in time-out frequently each day. She would carry on, complaining and yelling about being put in her room; and after the five minute time-out, she'd go right back at it, arguing about why she'd been put there in the first place. Most of her transgressions were related to hitting, kicking, biting, scratching, or otherwise abusing her older sister. There was a "zero tolerance" rule in the house for such behavior, yet the frequency of these events was on the rise. Daisy's mom could count on four to six major temper tantrums a day where this little dynamo would throw herself on the floor, kicking and screaming when she did not get her way. Otherwise, Daisy was incredibly fun-loving and easygoing, and once over her outbursts, engaging, helpful, sociable, and ready for action. It was difficult for anyone to stay mad at Daisy because of her remarkable charm.

Unfortunately, this was the worst possible kind of sister Lisa could have hoped for. Even though Lisa was several years older, she would usually acquiesce to whatever Daisy wanted. In this way, Lisa would avoid conflict, keep the peace, and in her mind, perhaps, continue to receive her parents' praises. Of course this was terrifically unfair, and Lisa was almost receding into having no self, no desires, no

backbone, and no grit. [Some years later, I also treated Lisa, who responded well to a homeopathic remedy and began to blossom and assert herself. I wish I had had the opportunity to treat her sooner!]

The report from Daisy's preschool was mostly fine. She was a bit pushy and domineering to the other kids but otherwise helpful and appropriate. A few times she had elbowed or shoved her way to something or someone she wanted, but when reprimanded she seemed to understand that such behavior was not acceptable. Her mother was relieved that at least Daisy's most aberrant behavior had not found its way into the classroom.

Asthma and eczema

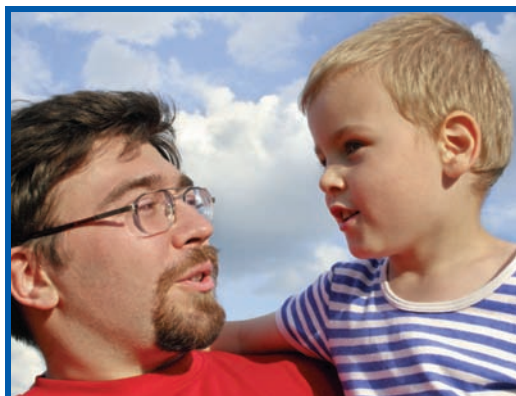
Daisy had some asthmatic breathing difficulties especially when the weather was warm and damp. She often had a lot of yellow, green mucus from the nose, had had conjunctivitis several times, also with

lots of yellow discharge, and seemed to have postnasal drip that she was unable to cough up. These symptoms were better in the colder months, and in fact, Daisy seemed to prefer wintertime in general. She never wore a hat, and her parents had a hard time getting her to even wear socks in this cold New England climate. She took some medications daily for the asthma and used an inhaler as needed.

Daisy had mild eczema that was also worse in the summer, behind both knees and a bit in the bend of the elbow. Her mom used *Calendula* ointment when the eczema was especially bothersome in the warm months.

Gusto and appetite

Daisy loved food and would eat and drink almost anything. She was fond of sweets and juicy things, fruits and popsicles. She ate with gusto and great appetite. Her mother wondered if she should be curtail-



Required Reading for Parents

The best practical book that offers immediate results to improve family communication is *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine

Mazlish. It is required reading for all parents. Give it to families having babies.

The work in this book is monumental while simple and effective. Topics include: How to Help Children Deal with their Feelings, Engaging Cooperation, Alternatives to Punishment, Encouraging Autonomy, and Freeing Children from Playing Roles.

Any family with more than one child also needs *Siblings Without Rivalry: How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live Too*, by the same authors. The skills laid out in the first book are essential to this second one, however, so don't skip!

I have used the teachable, logical, and compassionate methods offered in these books with countless families in my practice as well as in my own home. I cannot think of a more important set of books to give families. Being able to communicate successfully is essential, and anyone can do it. The writing in these books is accessible and relevant, and the comic illustrations bring it all to life.

So the next time your friend or relative is having a baby, forget about giving another receiving blanket or chubby board picture book. Do them the favor of a lifetime and give these books instead. Combined with supportive homeopathic prescribing, I can't think of a better way to help make the world a better place for all kids and adults.

ing Daisy's food intake, and she worried about Daisy's weight. She wished Lisa would eat half as much.

Daisy slept uncovered always, in the knee-to-chest position. Her mother asked me if it was normal for a little girl to masturbate. I asked what she meant. She said that Daisy would put near anything between her legs and rock back and forth. I told her it was not abnormal, but that if it happened frequently and distracted her from doing other things, or if she did it in preschool or in public, she should be stopped and told that was something best done alone in her room at home.

A remedy for Daisy

The remedies that I considered for Daisy were: *Belladonna* and *Lachesis* for her intensity, jealousy, violent outbursts, internal heat, and asthma; *Sulphur* for her robustness, extroversion, eczema, and asthma; and *Medorrhinum* for her amazing ability to connect with people of all ages, her passionate intensity, her easy slip into and out of aggression, her tendency to masturbate, and her excessive green, yellow mucous discharges. Ultimately, I chose *Medorrhinum* since its indications seemed to best characterize Daisy's symptoms.

When we were finished with the interview, I gave Daisy one dose of *Medorrhinum* 200c and asked them to return in two months. I also wrote a list of what I wanted to see change:

1. more cooperation
2. less violent actions toward sister
3. calmer household
4. fewer asthmatic symptoms
5. less masturbation

This was for my purposes but also for her parents, to be sure we were all on the same wavelength in terms of what the remedy was to address. I like writing such a list because then, at our follow-up visit, it gives us a starting point for assessing the efficacy of the remedy. When many of the patient's issues are in the psychological/ behavioral realm and I am also suggesting some psychological techniques (more about this later), I like to include some physical elements on the list—things that are much less likely to be impacted by such techniques.

In my experience, the right homeopathic remedy given to key family members can help immeasurably in situations where sibling rivalry and behavior prob-



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lems are prominent. Of course, it would be best to treat all the kids involved as well as the parents, but this is not always possible.

Building communication skills

The work of the homeopathic remedy will be strongly supported by conscious effort along with specific parenting and communication skills. I always ask first, to be sure advice is welcome before making any parenting recommendations; for many, this is delicate ground. Daisy's parents were open and welcoming to any help available, so we spent the better part of the remaining half hour going over some skills that I wanted both mother and father to implement as follows.

1. Anytime there was an act of aggression toward Lisa, one of her parents was to get in between the girls, put his or her backside to Daisy, and gush concern and care toward Lisa. After that, they would put Daisy in time-out. In this way, they first paid attention (and loving attention at that) to the offended not the offender.

2. When Daisy came out of time-out, they were no longer going to tell her why she was there or engage in any discussion or argument about it. She knew why she had been put in time-out. To bring the subject up again was not needed and, in fact, gave more air time to the child's poor behavior.

3. They were to run, not walk, to the nearest bookstore and buy the two books by Faber and Mazlish: *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk*, and *Siblings Without Rivalry*. I have used the teachable, logical, and compassionate methods offered in those pages with countless families in my practice as well as in my own home. Helping youngsters face and navigate conflict with skill and confidence is a lifelong gift. [See sidebar on page 16 for more information.]

The remedy or the skills?

The skills recommended in these books will go a long way toward helping families where there is a lot of conflict, but they will not do it all. In situations where the constitutional type or temperament of one or more of the children are not well suited for each other, well-prescribed homeopathic remedies will provide the missing key.

I have sometimes been asked whether the changes in parenting strategies could be the main reason behavior issues and sibling rivalry improve in my patients. I answer that while the impact of parenting techniques should not be underestimated, such results show up over time. I have not seen major personality shifts in a month or two just by teaching and modeling communication skills; but I *have* seen major shifts when a correct homeopathic constitutional remedy was given. The resistant child becomes less resistant, the jealous child less jealous, the aggressive child less aggressive, the passive child more assertive. For many children, the right homeopathic remedy allows the conscious and focused work of parenting to make a difference. And when used together, constitutional homeopathy and parenting skills work synergistically.

Like a new person

Such was certainly the case with Daisy. At our first follow-up appointment, Daisy was her usual exuberant self, but her mother, a reserved and quiet woman, grabbed me in a bear hug in the waiting room. I guess we'd had some success! As it turned out, Daisy was like a new person. All of her good and wonderful attributes had remained, while the abuse of her sister, the intense temper tantrums, and the violent outbursts were nearly gone. Daisy's tantrums were down to once or

twice a week and often seemed like pale imitations of her previous displays.

Her asthma symptoms had been very good. She had gone several weeks without use of the inhaler—an improvement—though she still had a lot of mucus. Since it was winter then, however, and she tended to improve in winter, the real test of this symptom would come with the warmer weather. Daisy's mother had noticed less masturbating; in fact, she could not recall seeing any in the past two months. In addition, Daisy's eczema seemed to be clearing up.

I loved hearing that both Daisy's psychological and physical issues were moving in the right direction. I was confident that the remedy given was correct and that Daisy and her family were still enjoying the benefits of a good homeopathic remedy prescription. So I decided not to give another dose yet but to wait and see how long the benefits of the first dose would last. I asked them to return to see me in three months, but to phone me earlier should the need arise.

Have a plan

Her parents also thanked me for the book suggestions and said they were now buying copies for friends. Though the techniques did not work every time in every situation especially if Daisy or they were very tired or stressed, at least they now felt like they had strategies to use—that is, they had a *plan*. They were happy to feel less overwhelmed and more directed in how they were raising their girls. This point should be underscored. If parents can feel empowered to be making changes and know they are moving in the right direction, this can help immeasurably. There is nothing worse than not knowing how to proceed. If parents have a plan of action, even if it does not go perfectly each day, at least there is a plan. And if both parents sign on to such a plan, supporting and reinforcing each other, better yet.

Daisy does well

Daisy maintained her behavioral and physical improvements over the following year, helped by a few repetitions of *Medorrhinum* at various intervals when it seemed that she needed it. For example, she would get another dose when mild asthma symptoms cropped up in sum-



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mer time attendant with a slipping back into some of her old behaviors, and she would quickly be back on track.

It's now been four years since Daisy's first appointment, and her asthma and eczema are problems of the past. Her mom will bring her in now for the occasional acute problem, but Daisy has been mostly well and doing fine in her primary grades. The sibling rivalry has ratcheted way down to the point that the girls get along better and seem to have developed more of a friendly relationship. Their mother talks about overhearing them working out their differences, and she says they do a better job listening to and hearing each other. It's not always harmonious, but it is no longer like non-stop World War III.

Daisy has evolved from a self-centered overbearing toddler into an articulate and confident grade schooler, still with a strong will but one that she no longer uses to overpower others. I have not given her another remedy beyond the *Medorrhinum* but imagine at some point she will need *Phosphorus* or *Sulphur*.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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The family plan

Since I first saw Daisy, I have had the opportunity to treat her whole family. Both sister Lisa and mom have done well with the remedy *Carcinosin*. [Without going into great detail about their cases or the indications for the use of *Carcinosin*, you can think about this remedy as somewhere between *Pulsatilla*, *Phosphorus*, and *Staphysagria*; in other words, a sweet, slightly needy person, who seeks care and protection and cannot tolerate conflict.] The dad has done well with *Ignatia*. Like any satisfied customers, Daisy's parents have sent me many patients, those with emotional issues as well as physical problems. Not all of them have seen the dramatic results that Daisy has, but then again, most of them did not present with such dramatic symptoms either!

World peace begins at home

So, recommend constitutional homeopathy to friends and family who are experiencing a lot of conflict in their lives—along with the Faber and Mazlish books or others on the subject, parenting classes, and communication-building classes. I do not believe that such dynamics and skills learned in families and between siblings stay only in the home. Learning how to be cooperative with others and to listen and speak with openness and respect are essential skills to being a successful person in most any path one might choose, and a family with children is the perfect place to begin.

In the *Siblings Without Rivalry* book, a favorite goal of mine is “finding solutions that everyone can live with.” One time many years ago when my own children were in elementary school, we passed an anti-war rally in our town. My son turned to me and said, “Ma, I don't think the mothers of the people involved in that war were ever taught how to find solutions that everybody could live with.”

In that moment, I knew all our years of working toward family harmony were well worth it.