

The Sin of Jealous Competition¹

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In attempting to reduce conflict in the family, the most persistent question parents ask is; why do children fight? This is not a new problem. We all remember the bible story of Cain and Able and the deadly result. Jealous competition and sibling rivalry have been with us for centuries.

By far, the most common explanation is that fighting is human nature. People have believed this for centuries that human beings, especially men, are aggressive and belligerent and little can be done except subdue their anger and hope little harm is done.

Parents are often puzzled by a child's misbehavior and wonder if they are to blame. There are "blame the parents" laws from coast to coast. Parents need help, not blaming. In contrast, newer ideas in psychology state that children choose to fight for a purpose. This is called purposive behavior or choice theory. Granted, parents can add fuel to the conflict by how they react but seldom are they to blame. Blaming, always adds to the discouragement. In such a situation everyone, including the parents, need encouragement. The problem is we do not know what to do about a child's misbehavior besides using fear, power, and the threat of punishment.

Children may fight for a variety of purposes. One of the most common is to get one or both parents involved. It's amazing how little fighting may occur when the parents are not available. Yet tattling is often used to involve the parents after the fact, or at a later date.

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The fighting is most intense in a two or three-child family, where the children are close in age, usually two to four years apart. Although an only child can choose to fight with father to get mother to come, and thus creates a two-child family.

In a typical fight, the younger sibling starts the fight directly or indirectly and screams for help while the older sibling is finishing the fight. When a parent comes to the rescue of the younger sibling, and lectures the older sibling because he or she should know better, the younger one will sneak a smile as the older one is getting into trouble. Consequently, the oldest views the parents as unfair. The stage is set for another fight, which will involve the parent, as the purposes continue to be met.

Parents are advised to become aware of jealous competition and at least not add to the **comparing** and **competition** that prevents children from developing their own uniqueness and self-reliance. Remembering that all behavior is chosen for a purpose, they can extricate themselves from fights and instead trust the children to settle their disagreement. Parents, by choosing not to move towards the fight, will disrupt the mistaken goals of their children. By so doing, parents can teach children how to reach agreements without fighting, that cooperation is in their favor, and families are made to order for helping each other.

Regular family meetings, mealtimes, fun times, cooperative activities, mutual respect and trust, and the spirit of encouragement can offset jealous competition in this imperfect world. These attributes will educate family members for a society of freedom, cooperation, and democracy. The emotionally self-reliant person is someone who finds meaning by being help and not a burden. An overall goal of parenting is to work your self out of a job by raising children who are self-reliant and demonstrate social interest.

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