

Parent and Family Education

Joyce McKay
Gary McKay
Column Editors

This column is devoted to innovative/special techniques and procedures for working with family and parent training. Contributions or questions should be sent to Joyce and Gary McKay, 18000 N. Heatherbrae, Tucson, Arizona 85715.

Contributor: Lynn Lott

Sibling Rivalry: Requiem for a Brother

I intended to write this paper about myself as a parent; about my eight month old daughter and some of the numbers we've already done with each other that I've recognized in *Children: The Challenge*. As I've read and thought about Dreikurs' ideas, however, I've found myself primarily focused on my brother who died three weeks before my daughter was born. Because Tom has been so insistently in my thoughts, and because I believe that to know oneself as an adult and a parent it is necessary to know oneself as a child, I've decided to write about myself as a sibling — or, more accurately, about Tom and me as siblings. While I saw Tom, myself, and our parents in every chapter of Dreikurs' book, the topic I've chosen to focus on is the one that remains the most unfinished for me — that of sibling rivalry, competition, and conflict.

I was the oldest child and in most respects fit the stereotype very well. Even as a young child, I was reliable, dependable, conforming, responsible, and extremely eager to please. When Tom was born shortly before my third birthday, I became more of all of these things. I think I also decided quite firmly that I might not be able to be the baby, but I was going to make sure I

Lynn Lott, a family counselor in Santa Rosa, California, submitted this article by a member of one of her parent study groups. The article shows how much can be gained by participating in one Book Study Group. The article also teaches us the influence of family interactions, once again stressing the importance of understanding behavior in relationships and not in a vacuum.

was always the best. As Pepper (1970) notes, the oldest child needs to be first in the sense of gaining and holding superiority over the next child and with the birth of a sibling usually strives to regain mother's attention by positive deeds. Particularly after I started school, I was successful in my attempts to be "best." My one failing, until adolescence and rebellion, was an insistent preference for reading over helping mother with the housework. However, since scholastic success was a much higher family value than helping mother, this didn't seriously jeopardize parental approval. (If it had, I'd probably have been much more helpful.)

My success at being "best" and our competition for parental approval left only one role for Tom — that of the "best worst" (Dewey, 1978, p. 7). He was as successful in his role as I was in mine, but the results for him were more destructive. Dewey states, in her notes on Adlerian psychology, that "the interaction between members of the family is the most significant contribution to the formation of personality" (Dewey, 1978, p. 8). A significant portion of the interaction of my family revolved around the sibling rivalry between Tom and me, with me always the helpless, innocent, good victim, Tom the bad, aggressive culprit, and our parents jury and judge.

We were a practiced and accomplished team. Tom would tease and hit me, I would run to Mama and tattle; I would be consoled, Tom would be scolded and/or punished and mother would be kept busy with us. I would get all "A's" and glowing "citizenship" reports; Tom would fail everything and spend as much time in the principal's office as the classroom and we would both get a lot of parental attention — praise for me and bribes, threats, and punishments for Tom.

When I became an adult, I realized that in always being "good" I had contributed to Tom choosing to be "bad," but it was not until I read *Children: The Challenge*, I remembered or could admit to myself that I had a real stake in his being "bad" and so helped him stay in that role. As I thought about this, recollections of how I would subtly goad him into aggression and emphasize the contrasts between us come back. Bad Tom broke my bedroom window! A spanking and no dinner for him!! Well, yes, I had locked him out of the house for over two hours, but he deserved it because he was teasing me again, Mommy. Tom gets up early the Christmas I am eight and he is five and opens ALL MY PRESENTS!! He even eats all the cake mixes that came with my toy kitchen set! I can't remember if or how I goaded him into that one, but I do remember that the flak Tom got and the petting I got made it well worth it. Also, it was a victimization I got a lot of mileage out of; at thirty, I was still telling the tale of how awful Tom opened all my presents that Christmas.

The consequences of our competition and the interaction of all four family members around it were detrimental and counterproductive for all of us, though most severe and dramatic for Tom. As children, the immediate consequences were a lot of sympathy and attention for me, a lot of disapproval and attention for Tom, and a lot of undue service from mother. Mother was kept busy with us and that, and the attention, were of course the payoff for both of us, as Dreikurs and Soltz (1964) point out. The other results were that neither of us learned much about cooperation, adjustment, and fair play. Tom didn't learn how to resolve situations without force or how to meet his needs through success. I didn't learn how to manage for and rely on myself (to this day, I look around for my rescuer whenever I'm involved in a conflict of any kind), or how to tolerate failure without coming apart.

The long term results were more destructive for Tom than for me. From a very misbehaving and discouraged child who relied on his badness to secure attention, he became a misbehaving and severely discouraged adult who believed in that badness. The alcoholism that killed him at 29 was chosen by him as a life style worthy of such a "bad" person and one that continued to give him intense, if negative, parental attention and involvement.

Although I have wondered the past several years if there was a way Tom and I could both step out of the restrictive roles we designed for ourselves as children, it was not really until his funeral I honestly wanted to do that. The funeral was a big family affair, as Greek funerals usually are. I was over nine months pregnant with the first grandchild on my parents' side and holding down a well-paying and fairly prestigious job (the good kid); Tom was dead at 29 of complications of alcoholism (the bad kid). I had insisted on flying down to LA for the funeral to be with my parents and to try and say goodbye to Tom, though my obstetrician and my common sense advised against it. (After all, the good kid had to support her parents through the ordeal the bad kid had created for them). Throughout the day, relatives were patting my bulging abdomen, smiling at me approvingly, squeezing my hands and saying things like "How wonderful you're going to have a baby, it will help your mother so much." "Thank God your parents have you!" "Your parents always count on you." Sorting it out later, I think it was because for the first time, I didn't want to play the game and thought that day at least belonged to Tom. But by his death, Tom had crystalized his role — and mine in relation to him — forever.

Perhaps it's simplistic to suggest that Tom's unhappy and self destructive adulthood was a direct result of our childhood conflicts, our perceptions of those conflicts and our interactions around the rivalry. If not exclusive cause and effect, however, it was certainly a major contributing factor. There is

nothing I can do now to alter my relationship with Tom, but I'm grateful for the insight *Children: The Challenge* has helped me attain. As many have pointed out, one of the advantages and rewards of having children is the chance to "do it again" vicariously. If I couldn't avoid the negative interactions around sibling rivalry as a child, I think I can help Katie and her future sibling avoid them and thus avoid it as a parent.

References

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I do yoga everyday but I never make a habit of it.

— Krishnamurti