

July 2008

Topic:

Help! How do I deal with sibling jealousy?

Question:

My son Jason is going to camp for his first time and there's been a lot of fuss to get him ready. His younger brother Adam seems very jealous of all the things we're buying Jason – especially the fishing rod! He's throwing his brother's things around and making life quite miserable for us. I've tried to talk with him but it makes no difference. I'm tempted to buy Adam some new things too so that he doesn't feel so left out and jealous. Is this the right thing to do?

From, the 'Do I make it even?' mom

Answer:

You are experiencing what many families go through. But, buying stuff for Adam is definitely a temptation you don't want to give in to.

Here's the message it sends him:

- When my brother gets something, I deserve something too
- All you have to do around here is make a big fuss and you get what you want
- I can't handle it when my brother gets attention

This all smacks of entitlement - "There has to be something in it for me, or I can't handle it".

Healthier Messages

- Jason is getting these things because of the "needs of the situation" – he's going to camp and I'm not. When I go to camp I'm going to need some things too.
- Making a fuss doesn't solve anything around here.
- Even though it's hard, I can handle seeing them fuss over my brother. It doesn't mean they love or care about him more!

Understand the Purpose Behind the Behaviour

You're likely right that Adam is feeling jealous. But jealous of what? All of the purchases? Or, all of the attention that Jason's getting? My guess is it's neither of these.

Adam is likely jealous of what he **perceives** all this attention to mean. Let me explain. Often children come up with the mistaken idea that **time = love**. So when Jason is getting more than his share of time or attention, then that might mean that mom and dad love him more!

How might a young child feel if he really believes this? Likely, sad or hurt. And what might he do about it? There are three common behaviours that crop up when kids are feeling hurt – and Adam is exhibiting the first one:

- Getting even – he's going to create havoc by throwing Jason's camp things around and, be as difficult as possible. With thoughts like, *"They'll feel sorry for what they've done!"* (Just as you may have thought when you were little and wanting to run away from home.)
- Go into retreat – feel sorry for him self and withdraw from everyone, with the attitude *"No one understands or cares about me!"* This is what a more passive-natured child might do.
- Win the parents over. *"I'll please them and be so good that I'll win their love back."* (I used to wistfully long for at least one of my children to respond like this – alas!)

Smart Solutions

Now that we know what's motivating Adam's outbursts, let's explore our options.

Unconditional Love

Don't be shy, you could come right out and ask him: *"Adam, could it be that you think mom and dad love Jason more because of all the stuff we're doing for him right now?"* Then assure him that this is nonsense – love has nothing to do with getting stuff for camp. Your love for him is never in question!

Needs of the Situation

The key is to help Adam understand the way you make decisions in your house. If the stove stops working, we get it fixed or buy a new one. If one of

the boy's feet grow and their shoes are too small, we buy new ones. (And if their brother's feet haven't grown, we don't buy him new ones.) And when it's Adam's turn to go to camp, we'll need to get him a sleeping bag, flashlight, and of course a fishing rod too!

Don't Take the Bait

Even after your attempts to reassure him, he may still have the need to retaliate. The trick is not to feel hurt or take his behaviour personally.

Respect his right to have a meltdown and **respect your right** not to engage or listen. *"You know I love you Adam, but I'm not enjoying this. I'd like to hear what you have to say when you're feeling calm. Mom is going to the other room."*

Give Him a Task

This is a great diversion and good for teaching him resourcefulness.

Together, research local summer activities and have Adam choose some special things to do while Jason's at camp. Who knows, he may feel he got the 'big catch' after all!

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