

Last week, we took sibling rivalry to task, and looked at how parents could spot the symptoms in their young children's relationships and behaviour. This week, we observe what happens when these kids become teenagers.

by
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Most sibling relationships improve as children grow up and mature. But it's not uncommon for sibling relationships to remain tense and unchanged.

Most of the time, as siblings grow up, they grow out of petty fights and childish squabbles.

Their cognitive abilities improve and they are no longer preoccupied with, or focused on, the thought that their parents favour another child over themselves, explained Ms Carolyn Kee, senior psychologist at the Institute of Mental Health.

In addition, each child develops a wider social circle, and becomes an individual diverging into his or her own areas of competence and interests. This usually decreases the need to compete for their parents' attention the way they needed to when they were younger.

They gradually begin to realise that they are valued for what they are good at, as individuals separate from their siblings.

Mrs Tan Yee Pin, deputy head of medical social work at the Institute of Mental Health, said that sibling relationships also improve when siblings find common interests and topics to talk about as they grow up.

With the improved cognitive ability, they can look more objectively and less emotionally at their relationships with other family members, and better analyse problems that arise.

Teens are usually able to see beyond their parents' sometimes unintentionally tactless comparisons between siblings, which now matter less than when they were younger.

Joy, 25, who remembers "fighting like cats and dogs" with her younger brother, said that her relationship with him improved tremendously as they grew into teenhood.

Her brother grew from being a playmate to being a friend, with whom she could share her views and dreams.

However, even in the teen years, Miss Kee cautioned that "competition might still underline the dynamics of the relationship".

Petty remarks like "why do you look so fat today?" can still trigger disagreements.

Day-to-day conflicts will remain, especially during the years of growing up. Hormonal changes rage, as teenagers become more aware of their bodies.

It then becomes a mission for each to protect his/her sense of privacy in a limited living area, which can heighten the tension

between siblings.

Familiarity can also breed insensitivity.

"They may go into each other's rooms without knocking, or go into the room and take things without asking. It doesn't have to be a really big issue to trigger an argument," said Ms Kee.

Parents can help in drawing the guidelines for personal boundaries, and creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and consideration.

Miscommunication also commonly leads to misunderstandings and quarrels.

Esther, who is now in her early 20s, recalled

how she often argued with her younger sister as a teenager, due to a miscommunication: "Sometimes, because she wasn't good at expressing herself, I didn't know where she was coming from, and it got annoying."

Some siblings remain stubbornly quarrelsome.

Ms Kee noted that some children with deep-seated resentment and anger do not grow out of it as they mature into teenagers.

A sense of injustice can arise out of seemingly trivial issues for an over-sensitive child.

But as the children grow older, the anger or blame is shifted in the direction of the parents, rather than at the siblings, said Mrs Tan.

She cited the example of a teenager complaining about her older brother's curfew as being later than hers. Mrs Tan said such disagreements could be reduced if there is good communication and understanding between parents and their teenagers.

Although sibling rivalry is normal, Mrs Tan cautions that there are some serious cases which warrant counselling, or even psychiatric help.

If daily functioning is impaired by sibling rivalry, such as when the child or children are losing sleep or having trouble concentrating due to constant conflict between them, it is a sign for parents to give serious attention to the problem.

Next week, we look at sibling rivalry in adult years.

