

## Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

**In your column two weeks ago called “Siblings need to share responsibility” you presume that the brothers are avoiding their responsibility to their mother. You did not question if the parent is contributing to the problem by playing favorites, or essentially refusing assistance from the other children. I do not think this is a rare problem. Add a little greed on the part of the favorite, unwillingness to discuss anything of substance on the part of the parents and you have ruined family relationships. I enjoy your columns and would appreciate your ideas on this family dilemma.**

**-- Andrea**

Dear Andrea,

You are referring to my recent column in which Barbara wrote that she felt responsible for taking care of her elderly mother, while her two brothers – who also live in the same town – never did a thing to help with practical or emotional support.

Mea culpa. Mea maxima culpa. You raise an important point that I should have addressed. Parents can set in motion painful family dysfunction when they play favorites. This is true whether their “kids” are young, or middle-aged adults. Sensing that parents (or grandparents) prefer one’s siblings leads to feelings of exclusion and low self-esteem. What’s more, parental bias inevitably creates jealousy, competition, and conflicts between siblings. In these situations, siblings fail to create meaningful connections with each other, and may resent each other for a lifetime.

If Barbara’s mother was playing favorites with her adult children, she could have benefited by changing her behavior early on. Like when these middle-aged baby boomers were much younger. She could have better understood that parents should never compare their children, or give special time, attention, or tasks to only one.

In fact, she might have known that an ideal way for your kids to have problems, and problems with each other, is to say things like: “You don’t need to do that, son. Your brother always does a much better job at washing the car.” Or, “Your sister Janie has always been the caring one.” With this kind of intra-family labeling and competition each child can’t develop his/her own identity. Celebrate their differences, but don’t stereotype them with comments like, “she’s the smart one,” or “he’s the athletic one.” Create opportunities for children to cooperate instead of compete. Engage in activities in which every child can shine. When everyone participates, excels at something, and has a good time together, it strengthens family ties. Make certain that each child gets some special “alone” time with each parent. While as adults, we might not throw tantrums or scream, “She got more than I did!” or “You wouldn’t let *me* do that!” but we may still harbor a lifetime’s accumulation of those feelings.

I really can’t tell from Barbara’s letter whether this kind of favoritism is what’s going on in her family. Perhaps this is so. While most parents claim they give love and attention to their children equally, several research studies show that, in fact, many have favorites.

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7/23/03

But if it is true that her mother is showing favoritism, it is clear that being the “chosen one” is stressing Barbara out, making her angry, and causing her to bear all the responsibility for her mother. She will benefit by asking a soul-searching question: “Am I being singled out as the favorite, when my brothers really want to help with mom?” In any case, an honest and heart-to-heart conversation with her brothers can help all of them better understand their situation, and each other.

If Barbara’s mother is reading this column (and I certainly hope she is!), she would be well advised to ask herself if she is favoring one adult child over the others. It’s never too late to change, and she may find herself surrounded by *all* of her loving children when she can learn to rely on, and respect each of them.

Send your personal coaching questions to [kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com](mailto:kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com) or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2003 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at [www.fullpotentialliving.com](http://www.fullpotentialliving.com).