

# CO-OP COMMUNITY NEWS

From the Parent Advisory Council  
of the North Seattle Community College  
Cooperative Preschool Program



March 2004

## Sibling Rivalry vs. Sibling Conflict: A Sibling's Bill of Rights

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**M**ention "sibling" and what comes to mind? "Sibling rivalry." And when we hear "sibling rivalry," what do we usually think of? Sibling conflict. Sibling rivalry seems to equate in our minds with sibling *conflict*.

It's understandable that we focus on the conflict aspect of sibling rivalry. In my experience working with co-op parents, sibling conflict is one of the top most troubling issues for parents. It's painful to watch our kids bickering, shouting at each other, or worse, physically attacking each other. To see our firstborn shove our new baby is to experience a rush of primal fear and rage that is startling, even terrifying in its intensity. Sibling conflict makes us anxious (are they going to hurt each other?); it makes us angry (why do they keep doing this?); it makes us worry about their inborn nature (is there something wrong with them?); it's yet another potential source of parental guilt (what have I done or not done to cause

this?); and if flies in the face of what is for many parents a fundamental reason for having more than one child (I want my kids to be close, to have each other when we're gone, to be friends for life). We panic and want to find some way to STOP it.

Yet sibling conflict is, as we all know, to be expected. It's the developmentally normal result of a lack of social skills and relationship skills, skills which are not innate but have to be learned. Parents teach these skills by viewing sibling conflicts as "teachable moments" and intervening to model and teach skills like turn-taking, asking, being assertive, expressing appreciation, trading, negotiating, self-calming, problem-solving, and so on. In preschoolers, sibling conflicts are also the result of immature nervous systems: it takes years to develop the neurological as well as behavioral capacity to control impulses, to feel an emotion without acting on it, and to think while feeling strong emotions.

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### 2003-2004 Calendar

#### March

- 2-6 Co-op Crossover Registration
- 8 PAC Meeting (Raffle Drawing)
- 13 Co-op Open Registration

#### April

- 5-9 Spring Break (no school)
- 12 PAC Meeting
- 22 FREE Parent Ed Lecture

#### May

- 24 PAC Meeting
- 31 Memorial Day (no school)

#### June

- 15 Last day of classes for Seattle Public School students

## In April: FREE Parent Ed Lecture

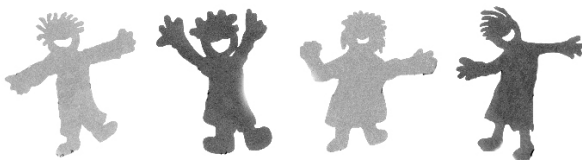
**WHAT:** "Start Them Young: Organizing 101 for Your Children," a PAC-sponsored Lecture by Ellen Langan, professional organizer and principal of Langan + Associates.

**WHEN:** Thursday, April 22, 2004, 7:00 p.m.- 8:30 p.m.

**WHERE:** NSCC Campus Room 2153

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## SIBLING RIVALRY

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Sibling conflict is more, of course: it's about actual *rivalry*—for space (“She got in my way!”), things (“He took the truck and I wanted it!”), and YOU—your time, attention and love. One reason we may focus more on the conflict dimension of sibling rivalry rather than this competitive aspect is that *we* know we love each of our kids fully, wholly and yes, equally (even though one may be easier to love than another because of temperament or other factors). It doesn't occur to us that they could be feeling we love them less than their sibling. It seems to us that there's no need for rivalry; there's plenty of love to go around.

Yet I always remember the analogy Penelope Leach uses in Your Baby and Child when discussing a sibling's feelings about a new baby brother or sister. Imagine, she says, that your spouse said, “I love you so much that I've decided to add another one just like you to our family!” One could predict there'd be a certain amount of conflict between you and this new spouse; and the conflict would not be based on a lack of social skills but on rivalry for your spouse's time, attention and love.

So I want to offer a few suggestions about what parents can do to reduce the rivalry between siblings. I'm calling these “rights” to emphasize how it feels to be a child.

### Sibling's Bill of Rights

#### The right to his/her own space.

This is about identity; having a separate identity that is recognized and respected. Rivalry increases when a child feels that parents don't value them as separate, unique selves. It's important for siblings to have a private space—a safe spot to store their own possessions and creations, and as

a retreat for getting away and/or self-soothing. Private space needn't mean a bedroom of one's own; my kids shared a room for four years because I thought it would strengthen their relationship (it did). But they each had their own bed, shelf and storage space. A private play space might be a treehouse, a tent in the basement, or one corner of the dining room walled off by a screen. One family used an old playpen as a space where the older sibling could play with his Legos without having to worry about a young toddler's intrusions.

#### The right to his/her own “stuff.”

We want our kids to learn to share, of course; but how would you feel if all your personal possessions were up for grabs (literally) by people who might by accident or intent destroy, misplace and misuse them? It helps to designate some items as communal (to be shared with family members) and others as personal property (even for the baby!). Having things of one's own teaches children responsibility and respect for others' property; it also imparts a sense of security, knowing that parents will help keep prized belongings safe from sibling takeovers.

#### The right to an identity of one's own.

We all have known of twins who are always together, and we're aware of the downside in terms of identity development. It's less likely with siblings of different ages, but we still can assume they'll like the same things, disregarding the distinct interests and talents and traits. Or we may focus more on their differences, labeling them in our minds or to others as “the (fill in the trait, ability or interest) one.” He's the intense one, she's the calm one, she's good at sports. If Colin learns to throw a ball earlier than Robin, but Robin shows an interest in music at an earlier age, then Colin

is labeled as “sports guy” and Robin as “the musical one.” We may not take Robin out to kick around the soccer ball as often and it may not occur to us to sign up Colin for piano lessons. But what if Colin is interested in music, and Robin also loves sports? They each deserve the opportunity to pursue those interests and not to forego them because it's their sibling's turf. It's natural and probably inevitable to compare our kids, of course. But we need to SEE them as individuals so we can nurture that individuality.

#### The right to his/her own developmental timetable, including regressions.

A common attitude with firstborns is expecting them to be “older” or more mature than we would expect them to be if they weren't an older sibling. The baby arrives and suddenly the firstborn has to be a “big” brother or sister. But what about the need to regress sometimes? Development involves leaps forward and regression backward. Conversely, we may treat younger siblings as if they were less capable than they could be. Children deserve the freedom to grow and change at their own pace, and not be subject to expectations based on their position relative to sibling(s).

#### The right to private time with each parent.

If the most important “resource” that siblings compete for is parental attention (read, “love”), then that time before the sibling arrived must seem like a sort of golden age...when s/he had exclusive rights to that most precious resource. Once a younger sibling comes along, that one-on-one time typically disappears—until it occurs to

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parents that some of the conflict they're seeing is due to the decrease in their availability. The older child gets less attention and less time, concludes that s/he is less loved, and starts treating the baby as a rival. Another common pattern is for Dad/parent #2 to take charge of the older sibling while Mom/parent #1 takes care of the new baby. This is great for the older sib's sense of being loved and valued by parent #2, but can create a feeling of being no longer valued by parent #1—and also creates resentment of the baby, leading to acting out in various forms.

Usually parents anticipate and notice the signs of the older sibling's distress at being displaced. I've been asked more times than I can count how to deal with an older sibling's aggression against the baby, and my suggestion always is: Arrange to spend some one-on-one time with your firstborn. If possible, make it a regular thing—e.g., every night for half an hour after Dad gets home—and, if the child is three or older, talk it up in advance. Having a regular "dose" of your exclusive attention will go a long way to reducing rivalry.

The dynamics are no different once babyhood is past. Having to always share your parent with your sibling(s) can create resentment. Spending time with each child individually—going to a park together, playing a game, doing an art project—gives the child a feeling of being valued, of parents being really interested in him/her; it's a self-esteem builder, and it reassures the child that there's plenty of parental love to go around.

### The right to time with parents as a couple.

There's something about that triad of two parents and child. Before sibling(s) entered the picture, this was reality for the first child. Suddenly it's gone; the baby is always around, that invader of the cherished space. If we can recreate, from time to time, that exclusive relationship, our firstborn will feel more secure. And what about that younger sibling who never had that exclusive relationship with the parents as a couple? Might they not envy the older sib? Giving each child solo time with the parents-as-a-couple helps with rivalry. It's surprising what this yields—for the child, a sense of specialness that equals (in his or her eyes) the sibling's; for the parents, getting reacquainted with the child—seeing them for who they are *in themselves*, not in relation to their sibling(s). If you've never done this, try it for the sake of your own relationships with your kids.

### Beyond Rivalry: Cultivating the Sibling Relationship

Respect for these "rights" of siblings—even if we can act on them only some of the time—will give each sibling a stronger sense of self and a stronger relationship with us. With that foundation, they're less likely to feel like rivals for our attention, our time, and our respect. And with less sibling rivalry, there's likely to be less sibling conflict.

Beyond decreasing their rivalry, what else can we do to cultivate siblings' relationship with each other? Here are a few ideas:

- Get down on the floor and play (or do some shared activity) with both siblings together at least some time each day. As you play, you can model prosocial skills: turn-taking, perspective-taking, cooperation, waiting, showing interest in the other's play, etc.

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## NSCC Co-op Preschools with Openings\*

	Co-op	Openings	Contact	Phone
<b>Toddlers</b>	Northgate PM	2	Elisabeth Sullivan	985.6949
<b>Pre-3s</b>	Ingraham	3	Robin Kelson	417.4505
<b>3-5s</b>	Broadview	4	Kari Van Sanford	784.9876
	Crown Hill PM	2	Laura Riedel	297.8424
	Ingraham	2	Cynthia Ramsey	417.5223
	Meadowbrook 5s	2	Elizabeth Barr	525.4747
	Sandhurst	1	Macy Yule	527.5539
	Victory Heights AM	1	Therese Bullard	367.5792
	Wallingford AM	1	Ann Weber	632.0646
	Wallingford PM	1	Christopher Shuhart	633.4416
<b>Web Link</b>	To view current listings and for descriptions of each co-op, please go to <a href="http://northonline.sccd.ctc.edu/parented">northonline.sccd.ctc.edu/parented</a> *current as of 3-8-04			

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- Talk to each, separately, about how much the other enjoys them and looks forward to being together.
- Teach the older sibling games/activities that will entertain the younger sib, and therefore reinforce the older sib for playing with the younger. Do so verbally, with praise/descriptive commenting and nonverbally, with smiles and interest. Point out the younger sibling's pleasure and interest in the older sibling's view to help build the relationship.
- Talk with the older sibling about child development (in age appropriate language!) to help him/her have patience with the younger sibling's behavior.
- Have play materials on hand that invite "open-ended" activity and can be used by both siblings in different ways according to their developmental level and interests. Make these accessible to both kids.
- Sit down as a family and look at photos of the two children together so they can see the history of their relationship, and see your pleasure and delight in their interactions.
- Don't compare them to each other.
- Don't "type" or "label" them—verbally or mentally.
- Strive for "fair", not "equal"; explain the reasons for treating them differently.

### When There's a New Baby in the Family

- Involve the older sib in your activities with the infant—keep them close by when nursing, rocking, etc. Invite them into the circle of care. You might have a basket of "special toys" to be used by the older sib sitting next to you, or "special books." If you're doing something with the baby/toddler that makes this impossible, maintain eye contact or verbal contact with the older sibling.
- Give the older sibling chances to help, specific jobs, roles to fill in relation to the infant, so s/he discovers ways to relate other than rivalry. The jobs/help needn't be work—it could be "showing the baby" something the older sib can do, etc.
- Allow the older sibling to regress, to "be a baby" if s/he wants to. Don't force the older sib to be a "big boy" or "big girl."
- Sometimes make the baby/toddler wait while you finish something with the older child, or respond to the older child's request, etc. "Tell" the baby he has to wait, so that the older sib hears you making her needs a priority.
- Provide outlets for the older sibling's anger, aggression, and other negative feelings about the younger sibling (books that raise

these issues, puppets and dolls that can be used to play out feelings about the baby, games and active play).

- Try to enhance the older sibling's self-esteem—that sense of being an important part of the family, being capable, being admired by the younger sibling, etc.
- If your older child is three or older, expand their "turf"—cultivate peer relationships, enroll in music or dance/movement class, go to interesting places in the city—so that home is not their only sphere.
- From time to time, show the older sibling photos of himself at the same age as the younger sibling. Talk about how he was at that age and how he's changed. Cuddle and make this a "special time" so he gets a good feeling about both stages of development (about himself and, by extension, about the sibling's).
- Finally, have fun with your children together! Let other things slide, if that's what it takes. And show your pleasure. There's no better way to help siblings enjoy each other.

### Books on the Subject

Jean Illsley Clarke,

[Self-Esteem: A Family Affair](#)

Adele Faber and Elanie Mazlisch,

[Siblings Without Rivalry](#)

Elizabeth Crary,

[Help, The Kids Are At It Again](#)

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