



COMPARING KIDS

YOU LOVE YOUR CHILDREN EQUALLY, BUT IT'S HARD NOT TO OCCASIONALLY MEASURE THEM AGAINST EACH OTHER. LEARN HOW TO EMBRACE AND FOSTER THEIR UNIQUE PERSONALITIES INSTEAD

BY CARA BIRNBAUM

RAISE YOUR HAND if you can spot what's wrong with this scene: I'm at lunch with my first-grader, June. Over grilled cheese and sweet potato fries, we chat about her favorite yoga pose (flying monkey), weekend plans (back-to-back birthday parties), and the milk shake we'll split for dessert. I tell her how much I love these lunches. Then, with a conspiratorial chuckle, I add: "If your brother were here, he'd be running around the table and dumping out the saltshakers."

When I recount the story of that lunch to Adele Faber, co-author of the bestselling classic *Siblings Without Rivalry*:

How to Help Your Children Live Together So You Can Live, Too, she points out my error: "Why not talk about how nice it is to spend time with your daughter without referencing your son at all?" she asks. Without realizing it, and with the best of intentions, I was setting up rivalry between the two.

And then it hit me: Sibling comparison is like the death-and-taxes of parenting. Pretty much unavoidable, no matter how many positive-discipline books you read and how hard you try. Problem is, whether expressed as irritation (*Why has your brother been waiting by the door for five minutes,*

Get the Facts Up Front

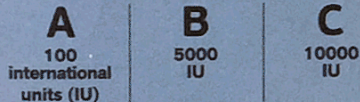


The foods we choose are often selected out of habit or simply because we're in a hurry. Here, Certified Dietitian/Nutritionist **Gina Keatley** (host of *Healthy Soul with Gina Keatley*) shows simple ways the **New FACTS UP FRONT** labeling system can help busy moms make smarter family food choices all day.

PER 1 CUP SERVING

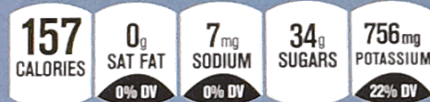


YOUR KIDS NEED HOW MUCH VITAMIN A EVERY DAY?

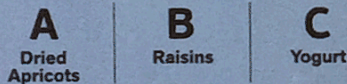


ANSWER: B, 5000 IU.* One cup of fortified oatmeal at breakfast supplies 20% of the DV essential for boosting immune function.

PER 1/2 CUP SERVING

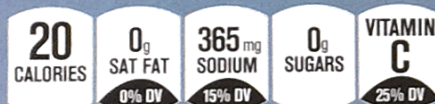


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PER 1/2 CUP SERVING



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*FDA; Based on a 2,000 caloric intake, for kids age four or older.

and you're still fussing with your hair?) or love (as in my lunchtime exchange with my daughter), viewing one sib through the lens of the other can sometimes stoke resentment, competition, and insecurity.

It may feel like a delicate balancing act, but with some reframing, you can turn the differences and similarities between your kids into major points of pride, valuable teaching tools, and the foundation for a healthy relationship. Read on for four lessons in how to do it (it's easier than you think, we promise!)

THE LESSON

fair doesn't have to mean equal

They may share the same DNA, but your children have their own minds, hearts, and talents. While you might think it's best to treat all your kids the same, that doesn't feel right to them, points out Laurie Kramer, Ph.D., professor of applied family studies at the University of Illinois. Older kids already *know* that they're different from their siblings, she says. Instead, they just want to be treated fairly.

For example, the 8 p.m. lights-out rule that works for a 7-year-old might not go over very well with an older child. So what to do if your youngest calls foul on his big sister's later bedtime? Explain that as a kid gets older, he should be eligible for more privileges,

As kids move through the early grade-school years, it's natural for them to test-drive an array of roles, hobbies, hairstyles—even overall attitudes—as a way to define their individual identities. Help them embrace these explorations.

or that kids who are younger need more sleep.

Of course, even attempts at fairness can sometimes result in conflict. Although you may not feel you have to justify all your decisions to your children, giving a rationale for issues that affect each kid differently is better than sweeping a child's frustration under the rug, says Dr. Kramer.

That way, he feels listened to and you both may share thoughts the other hadn't considered. In fact, kids who feel a sense of equity at home typically have better relationships with parents and sibs and a greater sense of well-being, according to Dr. Kramer.

THE LESSON

how you say things matters

When doling out praise, wording can be crucial. Unfortunately, acclaim for

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Children who feel a sense of equity at home typically have better relationships with their parents and siblings, as well as a greater sense of well-being, according to Kramer.

one child can feel like a put-down for the other. When admiring your son's playroom cleanup, resist the urge to mention your daughter's refusal to lift a finger. Remember, too, that broad-stroke flattery like *You're a great athlete* might translate to your other son as... *and you're not*.

By contrast, says Dr. Kramer, a more specific statement, like *I love the way you kicked the ball into the goal last night* sounds far less like a comparative statement to your other kids—and doesn't make your son feel like he's being labeled for life.

THE LESSON

kids crave their own path

As your children move through the early grade-school years, it's natural for them to want to test-drive an array of roles, hobbies, hairstyles—even overall attitudes—as a

way to define their individual identities.

Help them embrace these explorations. Pepper your quirky third child with questions about the latest scarf she's crocheted for herself. Indulge her sudden interest in a certain sport or other activity.

During this process, your kids will sometimes go on opposite tracks; other times they'll crowd into the same playing field. It's not unusual—or a bad idea—for a younger sib to forge his own path, knowing it's safer to master singing or tae kwon do, for instance, than to compete with an older brother who will always have two years more soccer experience, says Jeffrey Kluger, author of *The Sibling Effect: What the Bonds Among Brothers and Sisters Reveal About Us*.

If both boys want to do tennis, listen to and respect your older child's feelings about a copycat sibling, which may range from mild annoyance to a deep fear of losing the spotlight. In some cases, employing the imitation-is-the-sincerest-form-of-flattery argument will help smooth over the rough spots. In addition, if your older child is okay with the idea, Dr. Kramer adds, "Try giving him the role of coach, so he can show the younger one what he's learned over time. Often, this strategy will help the older sibling feel really good—not only about his own ability but about

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his potential role as mentor to his younger sibling.”

Meanwhile, you can take steps to help your younger kid blaze his own trail and move out of the shadow of an older sibling. To ensure that a younger sib who genuinely wants to pursue an older one's interest doesn't feel shut out or as if he'll never measure up, validate his insecurities about being smaller and less experienced than his tennis-star brother rather than dismissing them, says Dr. Kramer. “It's okay to say, ‘yes, your brother is four years older, so he's better at tennis today. With time and practice, you'll improve, too. In fact, it'll be fun to have two tennis players in the family instead of one.’ ”

THE LESSON
they need a bit of privacy

As your kids cruise toward their tweens and beyond, “they may start confiding in one another more than ever about what's happening in and out of school,” says Dr. Kramer. While that closeness is rather delightful at times, it can also create a pressure-cooker effect—because your kids may be occupying the same space (literal and figurative) and jockeying for some of the same stuff. (This can be especially pronounced when you have siblings of the same gender.)

Other times, tension comes from being on top

While you might think it is best to treat all your children the same, that doesn't feel right to them. Siblings know they're different from each other. That is why parental attempts at fairness can sometimes result in conflict.

of one another emotionally—such as when they disagree on hot-button issues or experience feelings of jealousy—particularly of friendships that one sib might be developing outside the house. Making sure each kid has enough time alone, away from his or her sibling, can provide a crucial release valve.

When tensions are reaching a boiling point, gently suggest to an older sibling that he might need solo time in his room, in the backyard, or at a friend's house, advises Faber. It also can help to pluck each kid out of the fray from time to time for a special one-on-one date with a parent. For siblings who share a room, designating a desk, a bin, or even a special drawer for important papers, toys, and keepsakes also shows just how seriously you take their individuality. ■