



oh, brother

What do you do when different siblings require opposite approaches to discipline? **BY ABIGAIL CUKIER**

FOR MICHELLE AND MARK RIEVAJ'S TWO-YEAR-OLD daughter, Anika, the rule was clear – if Anika stepped off the front lawn, she wouldn't be allowed outside. So Anika would stand obediently at the edge of the grass and peer over the hedge if she wanted to see down the street. But when her younger brother, Seth, was two, the Rievajs had to build a fence and put a lock on the gate.

"Anika never stepped on the sidewalk. But we had to tell Seth over and over, and it never really sunk in," says Michelle.

When siblings have different temperaments, or there's a significant age gap, it can be hard to discipline effectively while maintaining a semblance of fairness.

Sarah Kibblewhite, clinical psychologist at the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre, a children's mental health centre in Toronto, says it's OK if the degree of discipline isn't always equal. "If one child needs more attention or more discipline, let go of the guilt. You're doing what's best for their individual needs." As children grow older, however, their ability to compare rules and notice any perceived injustices increases. So how do you deal with the inevitable cries of, "It's not fair!"?

Kibblewhite tells parents to acknowledge that some things aren't fair, then explain that the rules are different for a reason. For example, when a younger sibling whines over not being able to use mom's laptop, just tell him, "When you're older, you can use the laptop, too." If you see a tantrum brewing, be ready to distract with an age-appropriate toy. (Sometimes a toy laptop or phone can satisfy a younger child – at least for awhile.) When possible, avoid such situations altogether with careful planning. (In this case, maybe the older child is only allowed to use the laptop while the younger one naps.) ►

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EVEN THOUGH IT'S VERY TEMPTING, NEVER COMPARE SIBLINGS TO EACH OTHER.

To diffuse an "It's not fair!" situation with Seth, Rievaj has him try some other new task on his own and praises him for accomplishing it. With preschoolers, it can be as simple as allowing them to pour their own juice or fold their clothes.

If one child is getting disciplined more often, Kibblewhite advises parents to give compliments when that child's behaviour is good. And even though it's very tempting, never compare siblings to each other with phrases like, "Your sister always follows the rules so well. Why can't you?"

Child and family therapist Jennifer Kolari, author of *Connected Parenting*, says it's perfectly OK, and usually necessary, to tailor discipline methods to an individual kid's temperament. Children she calls "gladiators" are joyous and funny, but have trouble settling down or knowing when enough is enough. With this personality, Kolari says it's best to stay calm. "If you yell, you give them a nice shot of adrenaline. Give them a perceived choice. Say, "You can have this consequence or that one. If you can't decide, I will."

It's OK to be softer with children who are "pleasers," or very sensitive to their environment. "Try, 'We need to talk about what to do. What do you think would be a good consequence?'" Kolari says kids often come up with harsher punishments than their parents would.

Sarah Berman's* eight-year-old, Kaila, accepts what her parents tell her, but her sister, Alyssa, 6, challenges everything. "To get Kaila to cooperate, we just have to point out that she is not listening. Alyssa needs a longer conversation or an ultimatum," says the Mississauga, Ont., mom. Berman and her husband discuss with Alyssa how she can make the right choices by talking to her about consequences before a situation arises. For example, she knows ahead of time that if she doesn't play nicely when her cousins come for a visit, she'll be sent to her room. This is a technique Kolari calls frontloading, which she especially recommends for "gladiator" kids. If Alyssa gets in trouble, the Bermans also talk to her about how she ended up in that position and how it can be avoided next time.

Rievaj said the key to (relative) harmony in her home is having clear rules that everyone is expected to follow. "While

Anika usually just needs a verbal reminder, Seth generally requires time alone to think about the rules."

A time out can be helpful for reactive children, not only as a consequence, but as an opportunity for them to take a moment. For a laid-back child, a gentle reminder or using a stern tone might work. "With a sensitive child, you have to watch your voice. If it is too stern, they might burst into tears before you reach a resolution," Kibblewhite says.

Age can also dictate which approach to use. Younger kids need immediate consequences, while an older child will get that misbehaving in the morning means a privilege can still be taken away after dinner. Positive reinforcement tends to work for most children. (A reward for one sibling might be extra screen time, while another earns a special day with dad.)

Another technique that Kolari says works for all temperaments is mirroring – showing your child that you see the situation from his point of view. She acknowledges this can be hard in the heat of the moment, or when you're in a hurry, and requires practice. For example, a big brother pushes his little sister after she repeatedly comes into his room to bother him. After comforting the little sister and disciplining the brother, a parent might say, "Your sister always wants attention and that can be really annoying. But you know, she looks up to you and thinks you're the greatest. Let's talk about new rules so she stays out of your stuff. But you can still be a cool big brother, and teach her how to do new things."

No matter what, Kibblewhite reminds parents to support their child and his or her unique personality. "If you have a wilful child, let him choose what he wants to wear to school, as opposed to fighting about it every day. If you have an energetic child, don't expect her to sit in a restaurant for two hours and then punish her if she can't. Don't punish your child for her personality." ■

* NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED.