

_BEHAVIOR AND LIFE SKILLS

How Playing Favorites Among Your Kids May Play Out

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Do you ever play favorites with your kids? Maybe you spend more time with one child, are more affectionate to one over another, give additional privileges to certain children, or discipline your children differently.

Whether you do it intentionally or accidentally, you are not alone. According to [Psychology Today](#), favoritism happens in about one-third to two-thirds of American homes.

There are many reasons why parents may favorite one child over another – some more understandable than others. First, birth order plays a large role in how children are treated. Typically, first- and last-born children are favored over middle children because middle children never get to experience being the only child living at home with their parents.

Overall, studies show that first born children get the most privileges, and last born children receive the most affection. Next, the child's specific personality and behavior can influence how parents treat them. In general, parents are more affectionate with children who are pleasant and loving, yet discipline the children who misbehave more frequently.

Gender can also play a role in favoritism. In patriarchal cultures, parents clearly favor sons over daughters. In other cases, parents may favor the girls because they tend to be friendlier, more loving, and less aggressive than the boys. It is quite common for parents to spend more time with and feel particularly connected to the child of the same gender.

Finally, in families with divorce and re-marriage, parents typically favor their biological children over their step-children.

On the other hand, some reasons for favoritism are widely accepted. When parents bring home a new baby, it is expected that their attention will be focused on the newborn and that the older children may feel a bit neglected temporarily. When there is a sick or special needs child in the home, parents will need to spend more time caring for them.

In these cases, it is important for parents to explain to the “less favored” children why it is happening to assure them that it’s nothing personal and that they still love them just as much as the child who needs the extra attention.

Sadly, both the less favored and favored children can suffer during childhood and into adulthood. Those children who feel secondary can experience depression, aggressiveness, low self-esteem, relationship issues, and poor academic performance. These issues can even last once they have grown up and moved out of their parents’ house.

A study in 2010 entitled “Mothers’ Differentiation and Depressive Symptoms Among Adult Children” published in the Journal of Marriage and Family indicated that siblings who believed their mother favored or rejected them were more likely to be depressed in middle age.

Believe it or not, favored children can also struggle from being in that role for so long. They may feel pressure to uphold their parents’ expectations of them. They may also fail to maintain relationships with friends and significant others because they have trouble finding people who will give them as much love and attention as their parents did.

It can also be difficult for the favored child to maintain a positive relationship with their siblings because the siblings are bitter and jealous of the evident favoritism. These sibling relationships can continue to be strained well into adulthood if not resolved.

A new study at Brigham Young School of Family Life just revealed that younger children tend to be more affected by parental favoritism. The research involved data from 300 families with two teenage children. To measure levels of favoritism, responses from children and parents were reviewed. The children were asked about their relationship with their parents, and parents were asked how much warmth and conflict they experienced with their children.

The results found that if the younger sibling feels like they are not the favorite, then the relationship with their parents is strained. However, whether older siblings feel favored or not does not seem to have a major impact on the relationship. Researchers explain that the social comparison of one sibling to another is the real problem with favoritism. Younger children struggle more because parents typically compare younger children to older children, not the other way around.

Most parents worry that they are playing favorites at one time or another and are not sure how to address this concern. A parent’s first instinct is to treat all of their children exactly the same, but experts suggest that this approach can backfire. It is more important to love and support each of your kids consistently, and to treat them fairly instead of equally.

Each of your children has their own unique personality, interests, and needs, so it is best to adjust how you treat them based on their individuality. The best thing you can do is to be aware of any favoritism at home and try to nip it in the bud.

Children are happiest when they are treated differently, yet fairly. They don’t want to be treated exactly like their siblings or put on a pedestal. They want to be loved and appreciated for who they are.



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