

family

# Beyond rivalry

The relationship you have with your brothers or sisters is the longest you have with anyone. So what happens if you don't like them? BY PERRI LEWIS

**B**rothers and sisters are meant to love each other. No matter how little they have in common, it's assumed that they'll always be there for one another. In reality, however, relationships often play out very differently. 'We have so many fantasies about family – that blood is thicker than water, that your family will stand by you when others won't,' says Jeanne Safer, author of *Cain's Legacy* (Basic), a book on sibling estrangement. 'Well sometimes that's true, but at least a third of the time it's not.'

It's a subject few are willing to discuss. Sibling rivalry might be an acceptable topic of conversation, but siblings who actively dislike each other are less discussed. 'It's astonishing how hidden, how taboo it is,' says Safer. 'But when you start talking to people, their stories of complete estrangement all come out.'

Such problematic relationships are usually explained away by personality clashes or major arguments. And yes, Safer acknowledges, these factors do play a part. But the root of the problem begins earlier in life, with the way your parents manage the interaction you have.

'Parents' relationships with their own siblings affect the relationships of their children,' says Safer. 'And it affects them for life.' Subconsciously, she believes, parents try to right the wrongs of their own childhood. 'A cousin of mine was much younger than her older sister and the mother decided that the teenage girl really shouldn't be bothered by a toddler,' she says. 'So she put a door-gate up so that the little girl couldn't get into the older one's room. Her sister would steal toys and hide them in her room so the youngster couldn't get to them. It turned

out that the mother had been the older child and she had a little sister many years younger who got all the attention. So what did she do? She tried to retroactively fix her life. Now, my cousin and her sister never talk to each other.'

Not all difficult relationships have to be so extreme, however – while some verge on total alienation, others can be less fractured. To understand fully why some brothers and sisters can't get along, and others can't even be in the same room together, Safer thinks we need to recognise that siblings start as rivals, and that a strong relationship comes later. 'How parents deal with that, whether they accept it and try to work through it, or whether they subtly encourage it, or deny it, has an effect,' she says. 'Love is encouraged by the parents' response.' Should that love not be encouraged, a sibling relationship can be fraught with difficulties.

Of course, that needn't mean the siblings can never grow closer. Here are seven steps towards making your relationship stronger.

## 1 Prepare for hurdles

'Reconciliation is a hard job,' says Safer. Ask yourself: do you actually want to change the relationship, or just think you should? There needs to be enough of a reason to go through what can be an arduous process. 'There can be a lot of false starts, a lot of misinterpretation, and it can take years,' she says.

## 2 A fresh look

Acknowledge that your sibling doesn't see things the way you do. 'If you were the favourite, and you have a sibling who resents that, you have to face that you got a better deal than they did,' says

Safer. 'Sometimes just admitting that can make a huge difference.' And if you weren't the one who was favoured, reassess who was behind it. Was it really your sibling's fault they were favoured? Or do your parents have a bigger role to play?

## 3 Look behind the excuses

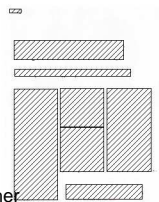
If you want to be close to the sister who married a man you dislike or who lives abroad, you find a way, says Safer. 'People allow these rationalisations to prevent them from doing something that they're afraid of,' she says. Consider that you might just be nervous about making the first move. It's not a silly fear – rejection from such a key figure in our lives can be extremely painful. But if your approach isn't welcomed, you're in no worse a position than before.

## 4 Forget Facebook

Rather than implicitly trying to rebuild a relationship with the odd comment on a Facebook photo, be explicit about wanting to mend things. 'The other person responds best when you say, "I'd like this to be better"', says Safer. 'Be frank, clear and open.'

## 5 You're not BFFs

Be realistic. How likely is it that you'll become best friends for ever if last year you only spoke once? But that's OK, says Safer. Turn alienation into a relationship where you can be civil to each other and you've made things 100 per cent better. 'Let's not be such perfectionists that we have to be intimate friends with our sib-



lings,' she says.

### 6 Don't lose hope

Reconciliation might seem like an unlikely scenario, but things can, and do, change. 'I think it's one of the tasks of later life to address the past and address one's regrets,' says Safer. Many siblings make up after the age of 50, when life circumstances change: parents can fall ill, and siblings you thought were unreliable suddenly prove invaluable. 'This is something that can very suddenly change the future for the better,' she says.

### 7 Accept when it won't work

Just as life changes can bring people together, they can drive us apart, too. 'For my husband and his brother, dealing with their ageing father was the end of any possibility of a reconciliation,' says Safer. 'And that's fine. Forgiveness isn't everything.' Sometimes, she believes, some relationships are so broken they can't be fixed. The only thing to do is try to understand your sibling, which can help turn hatred into something less destructive.

«Parents' relationships with their own siblings affect the relationships of their children for life»

«We don't have to be intimate friends with our siblings»

## What kind of sibling are you?

Even brothers and sisters who talk frequently can feel estranged from each other. Where are you on author Jeanne Safer's scale of separation?

■ **The chinks-in-the-armour siblings**

**You've had your fallouts, but something has brought you together – personal growth or the death of a parent. Moments of mutual goodwill have meant there's more warmth between you, and you can envisage a future where you enjoy each other's company.**

■ **The by-proxy siblings**  
**You both wish you were closer, but are afraid to raise the subject of your difficult relationship. Your solution is to approach each other tentatively through a proxy, usually a child. If your child gets on with your sister's child, sharing common ground can**

**make it easier to start talking properly again.**

■ **The cool civility siblings**  
**You talk (or, more likely, text or email), but you're not particularly comfortable in each other's company; it's intimacy that's lacking. Even though you might like to have a closer relationship, neither of you is willing to make the effort required to do that. Is it pride that's stopping you? Or the fear of being rejected?**

■ **The going-through-the-motions siblings**  
**The most common kind of estrangement – you send birthday cards, but never know what to say to each other face to face. You don't know much about each**

**other's lives, but don't really care either. You're not friends, but you're not enemies.**

■ **Weddings and funerals siblings**  
**You meet only on these important occasions, and make sure you're never left alone together. At best, meetings are tense; at worst, they are hostile.**

■ **Total alienation**  
**You have erased your siblings from your mind. You've got no desire to engage with them, and if you knew they'd be at a family event, you'd deliberately avoid it. Don't assume this is the worst type of relationship – for some it's the healthiest way to co-exist.**



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