

Harbaugh Brothers: A Healthy Sibling Rivalry?

How to nurture healthy sibling relationships

By [Rachel Pomerance](#)

February 4, 2013 [RSS Feed](#) [Print](#)



After a ferocious Super Bowl, John Harbaugh, whose Baltimore Ravens emerged victorious over his brother Jim's San Francisco 49ers, embraced on the field. John reportedly told his brother he loved him, and Jim said congratulations.

That bittersweet reunion amid one of, if not *the*, most intense competitions in American sports, may perhaps serve to inspire the countless people whose relationships with their siblings leave a lot to be desired.

The relationships we have with our siblings are typically our longest ones in life. But very often, they are filled with conflict. In fact, 44 percent of adults admit to "serious contentions" with a sibling, and such unresolved strife amounts to the leading source of regret late in life, says psychotherapist Jeanne Safer, author of *Cain's Legacy: Liberating Siblings from a Lifetime of Rage, Shame, Secrecy and Regret*. "It's one of the last taboos," says Safer, who herself was estranged from her older brother.

As indicated by the book's title, sibling rivalry is ancient; that function of evolution which spurs the competitive spirit causes children to vie for their parents' love and attention, Safer says.

To put it in more familiar terms, it's the "Hey, no fair!" argument heard so often among children.

"While sibling rivalry may always exist, sibling fighting does not have to," says Jerry Weichman, a psychologist with the Calif.-based Hoag Neurosciences Institute. "Parents need to communicate to their children early and often the importance of loving and respecting their siblings. By reiterating to their children that friends will come and go but family is for life, parents help foster positive bonds," he says. "It is also imperative that parents regularly identify individual positive attributes or behaviors for each of their kids and be sure to keep the praise equally. When it comes to sibling relationships, kids constantly keep score."

In the 60 interviews she conducted with estranged adult siblings for *Cain's Legacy*, parental favoritism always played a role, Safer says. Pent-up resentment shows up in what she calls "sibspeak," passive-aggressive language that goes something like this: "I wouldn't know. I don't have a country house," or "Dad always gave you better presents," she says.

So, how can parents try to avoid such an endgame? You can't guarantee your children will always get along or even become friends, says Harley Rotbart, professor and vice chair of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and Children's Hospital Colorado and author of *No Regrets Parenting*. "But as a general rule, solid families when kids are younger result in solid sibling relationships as the kids become adults."

"Insist on kindness," says psychologist Eileen Kennedy Moore, a mother of four and author of *What About Me? 12 Ways to Get your Parents' Attention Without Hitting Your Sister*. "Create a climate where the siblings are encouraging each other or congratulating each other or consoling each other if things don't go well," she says. "If sibling competition happens in that context, then it's just easier to handle ... no matter which sibling wins, the family wins."

For example, Kennedy Moore had a client whose younger child insisted on making everything into a competition. So, each time the younger child would gloat over a newfound victory, she instructed the older child to respond with "congratulations." Eventually this became boring to the younger child, who stopped the endless competitions.

When it comes to sibling fighting, parenting experts suggest varied responses, from when to intervene to the extent to which one should punish the children, if at all.

Rotbart advises parents to "stop the fight, hear both sides, make a decision regarding whether any action by the parent is required to address the source of conflict and, most importantly, have the kids immediately hug and apologize to each other—regardless of whether they feel they owe an apology or not. The fight needs to stop on the spot, and the kids need to be reminded they are, and should forever remain, each other's best friend."

Although that may be the ideal, it isn't always the case. And that's OK, according to Safer. "I think we have fantasies about the hallmark family, and one of the points I make is that brotherhood and sisterhood must be earned," she says. "Sometimes we need psychological brothers and sisters, not biological ones." But she and others urge those grappling with sibling strife to seek to repair the relationship, since one can still take comfort in having tried to make amends.

"Don't wait for him to get cancer," Safer says. First, admit that the distance between you stems not from geography or her spouse or his politics but from a deeper chasm, which likely started in childhood, she says. And then, put yourself in your sibling's position. "Look at how they see you, and when you do that, you will find that it's not always so very flattering."

In Safer's case, she was the favored child, excelling in school, while her older brother Steven struggled academically and socially. He put on weight, became bullied as a result, and ultimately developed [diabetes](#), which robbed him of both his legs. He died at 64.

The two were civil, but separate, says Safer, now 65, who wrote about her experience in *The Normal One: Life with a Difficult or Damaged Sibling*. When she realized, in her 50s, that the relationship was more important than she thought ("It takes a long time for people to figure out," she says), she tried to reconnect and found a momentary openness that didn't last.

Two years before he passed, she got a phone call from an emergency room in Cincinnati, where they grew up and he still lived. As the next of kin, she was asked whether to provide her brother, who arrived there unconscious, with a pacemaker. She didn't know what he wanted—since she didn't know him—but agreed and asked to speak with him afterward so that, at the very least, she could understand his health-care wishes going forward. He wasn't interested.

For her part, Jeanne Safer didn't mourn her brother's death until years later, when listening to jazz music triggered an outpouring of grief. Her brother was a jazz musician, she explains, and she is a singer. "We never played music together."