



Parent-In-Training

The Comparison Game

Having interacted with hundreds of families, I have witnessed many damaging family dynamics. We all know how emotional and physical abuse, neglect, and shaming can impact our kids. But, often times, there are more subtle interactions going on, ones that most people would not see. One of those is the comparison of siblings. Many of us know, as parents, that it is hurtful to overtly compare siblings. We try to steer clear of saying, “Why can’t you be more like your brother. He is so smart.” Hearing such phrases makes most of us cringe.

However, consider the more indirect ways we compare siblings. I can’t tell you how many times I have been introduced to someone’s children and the parent says, “This is Jimmy, our youngest. Isn’t he adorable? Just the cutest kid ever!” Meanwhile, Eric, the older son is standing by listening. It may be accurate to say that Jimmy is an adorable butterball with dimples that dominate his face and angelic curls that bounce when he laughs. But, what is the unstated message when a parent utters such phrases? What may Eric be thinking? Might he believe that his sibling is more adored than he is? I have also had parents say to me, in front of their children, “Emma is by far the easiest child. I never have to get on her.” Meanwhile, her sister Amy, who is more willful, is standing by listening. Might Amy begin to believe that she is the problem child? Might Amy begin to believe that her parents hold Emma in higher regard?

In my experience, people sometimes pay more attention to the “small whisperings” than the “shouting.” This is especially true for kids. They begin to compare and contrast, forming belief systems that coincide with the sometimes subtle family dynamics. Jimmy is always being loved upon for his cuteness. Emma is always being praised for being compliant. Meanwhile Eric and Amy are beginning to believe that they are “less-than” or second fiddle. So, let’s work on paying attention to the understated ways in which we send our kids messages. Let’s “step back” and see our interactions through our child’s lens. We may realize that life from their vantage point is not so rosy.

