

Discrimination Starts at Home

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Many of us, when we get together, laugh about which child was mom's favorite or whom she loved the most but is it really a joke? Or there is some reality to it? "I Love both of you in different ways" is what each mother usually tells all her children and those children repeat it to their children but chances are, if you have more than one child, you're showing favoritism whether you know it or not, whether its intentional or not. While it may seem like an innocent thing to do, favoritism often leads to discrimination, affecting sibling relationships with one another and with parents. Discrimination simply means unjust or prejudicial treatment of children on grounds of appearance, age, sex, family expectations, skills, aptitude etc. A large proportion of parents display everyday favoritism behavior like spending more time with one child, giving more privileges, less rules and regulations etc.

Parental Favoritism is just what it sounds like -- one child is given preference over their siblings. In order to qualify, this has to be consistent. One child being asked to do the other's chores because their sibling is not feeling well is probably not favoritism even if the child might perceive it to be. Favoritism doesn't always mean that parents love one child more than the other but it often means that one child is getting more attention than the other and children notice and understand more than we think, especially when it comes to who is receiving more attention. Some small

everyday examples being: "Your brother can buy this because he is older", "My sister always seems to get what she wants" "My sister is never wrong in my mother's eyes". The most common form of discrimination is, of course, sexual favoritism, which places higher social value on sons rather than daughters because sons "carry the family name forward" so it's only natural that a girl would feel discriminated if the parents favor her brother over her, pamper him and give him a better education. A child can also feel discriminated when the parents always praise the sibling who gets better grades and ignore the one who isn't doing so well in school. So, there is always the star child who gets unreasonable amount of parental approval, the oldest child who receives complete family attention or the youngest child who gets privileged treatment. Sometimes, one child is funnier or more talented than the other siblings, making them "the favorite" almost automatically. When a child is consistently denied benefits and rewards given to another, favoritism become discriminatory. Few years ago, I remember having a friend in school who had 2 elder siblings. Their parents decided to buy cell phones for each one of them. They bought a fancier one for the eldest one because she got exceptional marks in school. Later, when the other sibling did well in school, they upgraded his phone too. While this friend, the youngest sibling went on to do well in life, she had a terrible relationship with her mother because she always felt

that her parents didn't love her enough since she was never a high performer in school. While these examples might sound small, children are keenly sensitive to variations in how parents treat other siblings and themselves. They look for any signs of unfairness in the differential treatment parents give and stories of differential treatment by parents are legion. Kids are kids, even as adults. The annoyance of being less favored as a kid usually doesn't subside with time.

Less favored children feel a sense of disappointment and less valued. What are the consequences of this, you may ask? To start with, anger is the most common reaction. After all, they are not getting the parental affirmation and affection that they crave. Effects of this, left unchecked, can be long lasting. Even the slight injustices, whether real or perceived which happen to us as children which we think we don't remember anymore or we've made peace with, rise up again when there is a threat that the pattern may repeat itself with our own children. Favoritism and discrimination, like other destructive behavioral patterns, can even run across generations in families. The emotional problems go a long way and negatively impact their ability to navigate the social, academic, and business worlds.

It doesn't matter whether you're the chosen child or not, unequal treatment has damaging effects for all siblings. It's not exactly a cakewalk for the favored child either. They often develop a sense of entitlement. While he may grow up being the confident one, their siblings often come to resent them so they are robbed of one of the strongest relationships in life. Quite

often, they also develop an over dependence on the parents for validation and support.

Of course, no parent will ever agree to have a favorite kid. The first rule of good parenting is keeping all children at an equal level but it turns out, parents do behave differently with their children. What's important is that parents know the difference between favoritism and differential treatment. Parental favoritism is when a mother may like one sibling better than the other for a couple of reasons which is actually normal. Differential treatment is when parents obviously give more to one child, spend more time with him or her, and most importantly, treat one child better and show more discipline to the other. That's where the problem starts.

In hindsight, it's almost impossible to treat all children equally because they are all different. At the end of the day, every child wants to feel like they're different, not clones of their siblings. The best that the parents can do is stay aware of any differential treatment they give and try to be as fair as possible or have floating favorites, meaning, shift your attention from one to the other, at different times.

Years ago, I read a novel, in which a mother secretly assured each of her children – “don't tell the others, but you have always been my favorite”. Sounds fair, doesn't it?