

## The Lemonade Effect

The sour and the sweet  
of sibling squabbles

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I love lemons. When I'm sick, they're my go-to, squeezed in my honey-laced peppermint tea. When I'm sampling the first fruits of summer's harvest, a lemon vinaigrette highlights those herbaceous notes with a tart and tangy citrus explosion. And when I'm relaxing in the afternoon sun, a chilled glass of lemonade is the perfect accessory. Now, as much as I love lemons, their sourness can be unpalatable. But without them in the world, we'd lose all the amazingly delicious things that can be made when you add just a touch of sweetness.

Know what else is objectionable but with the right ingredients can produce a pleasing result? Sibling conflict.

## Adaptation: the sweetest ingredient for growth

When siblings fight there exists the most perfect, natural opportunity for parents to prime the capacity for adaptation in their children. More than just getting used to something in life, adaptation is a key developmental process that plays out both neurologically and emotionally. Adaptation is when we encounter the things we cannot change and are able to move through that experience to a state of acceptance. With the practice of adapting to that which is unchangeable, we become more resilient, more able to figure out alternate paths, and more able to persist when the going gets rough. This is an essential part of growing up. Without this, our children can never fully emerge into the best version of themselves. Adaptation cannot be taught with logic and reason, rather it must be experienced in order to be integrated into the brain and into the psyche.

Perhaps you've just had a second child and your older, previously only, child has had his whole world turned upside down. Or maybe you have two school-aged children who seem to constantly butt heads every time your back is turned. Or maybe it's adolescent children who are having endless and exhausting arguments over who gets to drive the car and what you're ordering for take-out that night. Right now, you're sucking lemons. But what if instead of banishing the lemons altogether, you found a way to embrace the sourness of sibling squabbles and allowed it to work magic in the lives of your children?

I just recently had a conversation with a mom who is raising a beautiful, 9-year-old boy with autism. He is sensitive to noise, to people, to change, to everything, and when he is overwhelmed, his behaviour regresses to infantile levels, his already limited expressive language disappears entirely, and he sleeps constantly to escape the upset. When his little brother arrived a year ago, he had a lot to adapt to and the world as he knew it was turned completely upside down. As his mom reflected on all of the many challenges of this past year, she landed on something so wise and brilliant, saying, "Isn't all of that absolutely perfect for my growing boy?"

What she meant was: what a fantastic, organic opportunity for a child with extra challenges to figure out adaptation and become the most amazing version of himself! Yes, it would have been much easier, both for him and for those in his life, to not have to figure out how to exist with a sibling. But easier doesn't always mean better, because where there is no challenge, there can be no growth. It is the context of the sibling dynamic that provides a natural opportunity to flex to the unchangeable and come out the other side resilient, and, as an added perk, with a life-long support system that grows with you. In fact, the sibling relationship may be the longest relationship our children have in their lifetime.

## Sommelier of the squabbles

As parents, being surrounded by constant sibling squabbling can leave you with the intense desire to squash it, shout it into submission, forbid its presentation, shame it, or make it wrong: all to make it stop. And yet, for resilience to really emerge out of this wonderful opportunity for adaptation, rather than making it stop, your job will be to prime it to fully run its course, to cultivate it so the result is more like wine than vinegar. Wait...what? Encourage the sibling squabble? Well, sort of.

Rather than encouraging sibling fighting *per se*, think of it instead as allowing your children's emotions to run their full course, with your empathetic support guiding them through that experience. You want your kids to express *all* of their mad, *all* of their sad, and *all* of their hurt. It is only when the emotion is fully expressed that the child is able to completely harness the potential for growth. If the emotion gets stuffed in the service of the household rules, or shut down by a well-intentioned but frustrated parent, it doesn't get to cycle through entirely. And as Freud said, "Unexpressed emotions will never die. They are buried alive and will come forth in uglier ways." Better out than in. Emotions must be expressed for growth to occur. All of which means that the frustration your children encounter in figuring out how to exist alongside each other is necessary and beneficial; your kids need to fight with their siblings in order for this adaptation thing to work as nature intended.

You can direct your children through this by coming alongside them, guiding them with empathy, and helping them move from mad to sad to calm. But it cannot be forced or hurried or demanded; rather, you show them the way through the situation by *being* the way through it. You don't have to fix it, you just need to honour and contain it. When your child is raging at their younger sibling for wrecking the castle they've spent all afternoon building, you really see and understand their anger and can respond with compassion: "Of course you are angry, love! That is so disappointing for you! I would feel exactly the same way in your shoes!"

As your child feels you hearing him, the rage will move through to sadness: "That's right mama, and I really loved that castle, and now I will never be able to build it the same way again." This is where the gold is: right at the point of your child coming to a place of being sad. Once again, your role here is not to fix; rather it is to sit alongside them, and really see and hear them and let them cry all of their tears. And while those tears roll down their cheeks, and spill out of their hearts, be the understanding big person who is right there to collect all of them.

This is also a perfect opportunity for the child who wrecked the castle to adapt and come to terms with what it is to exist in relationship, accept boundaries, and make sense of one's feelings. Understand that this child also needs a compassionate kind of presence from you to show them the way through. And alongside this compassion, a dose of firmness on how they are expected to treat their sibling: "Oh my love! You are having a difficult time! It is so hard sometimes to be a sibling isn't it? And you stepped on brother's castle, didn't you? And now brother is sad. That must be hard for you too. I understand." Allow this child both space and an invitation to feel all of his feelings—for they are no less valid or real than the other child's feelings.

Once all of the feelings have been released and a sad softness has settled into place, you can step in with some firmness: "In our family we respect the people around us, including the things that they have created. It was not respectful to step on brother's castle. That is not what we do in our family. Next time brother is building a castle, can I count on you to be very careful and very respectful of his creation?" This last part is key as it allows some closure to the circumstance for the child who messed up and also plants a beautiful seed of expectation and ability for them down the road.

With the practice of adapting to that which is unchangeable, we become more resilient, more able to figure out alternate paths, and more able to persist when the going gets rough. This is an essential part of growing up.

"Our families are our greatest classroom for learning how to get along with others."

Maggie Dent