

SHAZIA MAHMOOD suggests measures for dealing with sibling rivalry

*What you can do to curtail
your kids' fights*

"She got more than I did!"

*"You wouldn't let me do
that!"*

"I always have to give in!"

"Mom, he hit me!"

Familiar words around your household? Perhaps your children bypass the possibility of parental intrusion and go right for the gut.....or the shin or the hair, anything they can hit, kick or pull to prove their point.

Sibling rivalry. You are sure every family experiences it. But you worry that your children are the only ones who seem at each other all the time.

Are my kids normal?

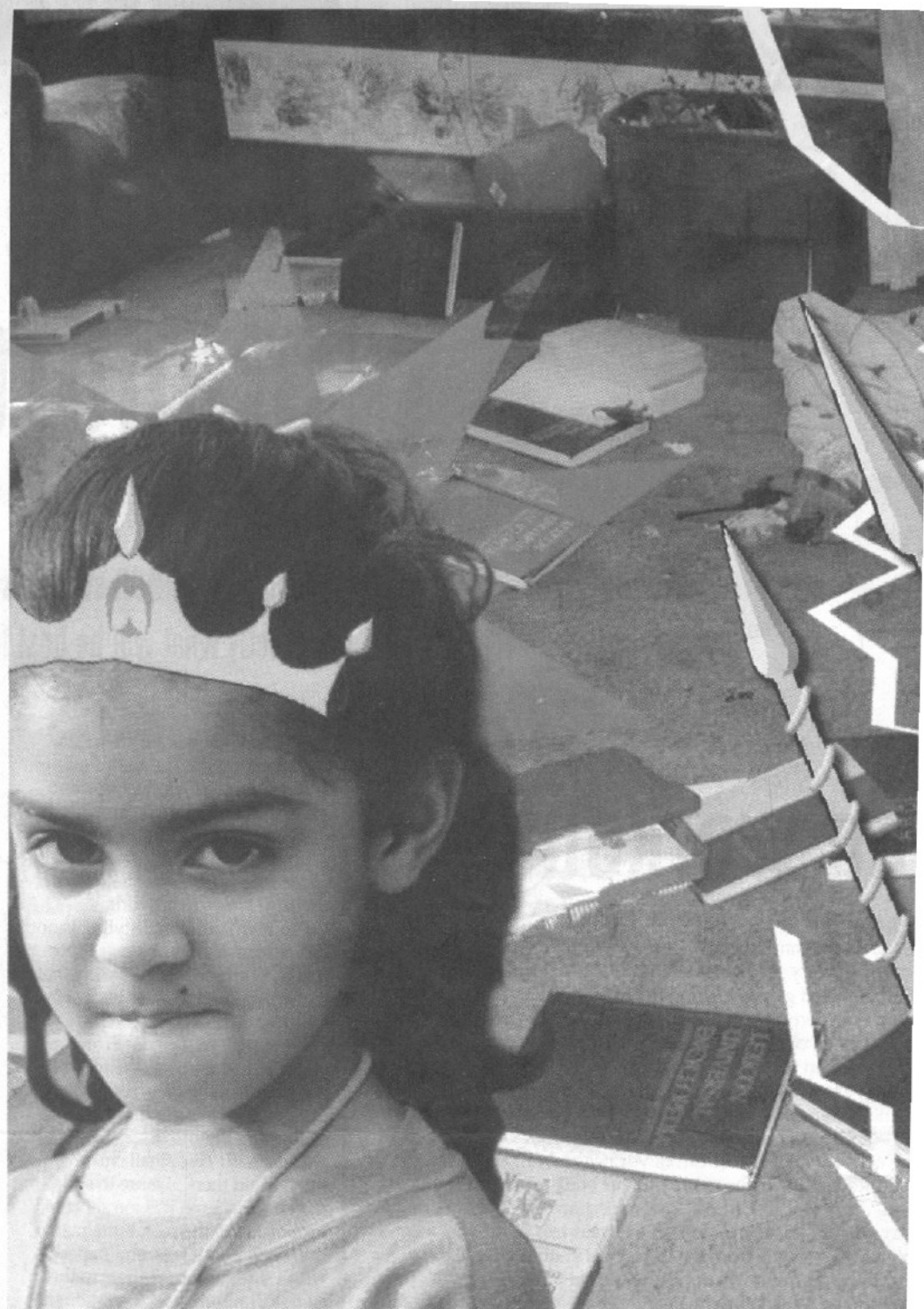
"Sibling rivalry is an expression of our sinful nature. It is a competition for the prize - the attention and love of the parent, some children will go to any length to establish their turf," says Alina a child psychologist.

Often, it is no one thing that brings out the worst in your children, but rather a combination. Family position, for example, can create natural sibling rivalry, Alina says. The first-born may be a high achiever, and the youngest, a pampered child. Those children can frequently take centre stage, leaving a middle child struggling for recognition and rewards.

Age is important, as well. If your children are ages 6 through 12, they may have reached their prime fighting time. That period, called middle childhood, is when children most heavily vie for their special place in the family.

As a single parent, you are faced with yet another factor - a changed family structure.

"Siblings will choose to act out at the exact time the family is falling apart," Alina says. "Normal sibling rivalry may become more intense, but the normal stuff comes and goes. You know it is getting out of hand when it becomes extraordinarily physical or when children express vendettas through cruel and



Sibling q

at each other's jugulars. In hindsight, I see that they were asking, 'Now that the family dynamics have changed, are you still going to love me the same way?'

Alina sometimes found herself simply wanting to dissolve in a heap of tears and say, "Fight among yourselves

"public place approach." As she had done earlier in her child-rearing years, Alina took her children out to eat. A restaurant was one place she knew everyone could maintain control while talking out their disagreements.

Over the years, Alina has discovered many other ways

through difficult situations- but if you lean on one of your children, you can expect the fighting to increase."

Another mistake any parent can make is assigning labels, especially within earshot of the children. Alina recalls several instances when parents of her school children

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may become more intense, but the normal stuff comes and goes. You know it is getting out of hand when it becomes extraordinarily physical or when children express vendettas through cruel and hurtful words."

She speaks not only from professional knowledge - Alina has counselled many parents during her nearly three-decade career span. She also speaks from personal experience.

"When my first husband died, I became a single parent of two college students," she says. "While their father was terminally ill, they were wonderful-responsible, reliable and thoughtful. But the minute it was just the three of us, they started going

asking, 'Now that the family dynamics have changed, are you still going to love me the same way?'"

Alina sometimes found herself simply wanting to dissolve in a heap of tears and say, "Fight among yourselves, and let the best person win."

"Parents have a tendency to fall apart at the seams," she admits. "They make mistakes in handling the rivalry and then wring their hands in despair when family reunions resemble Civil War battles more than Norman Rockwell paintings."

With fighting at its peak, Alina would have settled for a happy medium. Even that, however, does not always happen on its own. That is when she remembered the

her children out to eat. A restaurant was one place she knew everyone could maintain control while talking out their disagreements.

Over the years, Alina has discovered many other ways parents can lessen sibling rivalry-and many ways they themselves contribute to it.

Do not add fuel to the fire

Playing favourites may be the single parent's most difficult-to-avoid offence.

"Single parents must guard against gravitating toward one child, particularly if you have an older child who will be taking on more responsibility," Alina says. "Look for support from extended family or other networks. You will need other people to get you

fighting to increase."

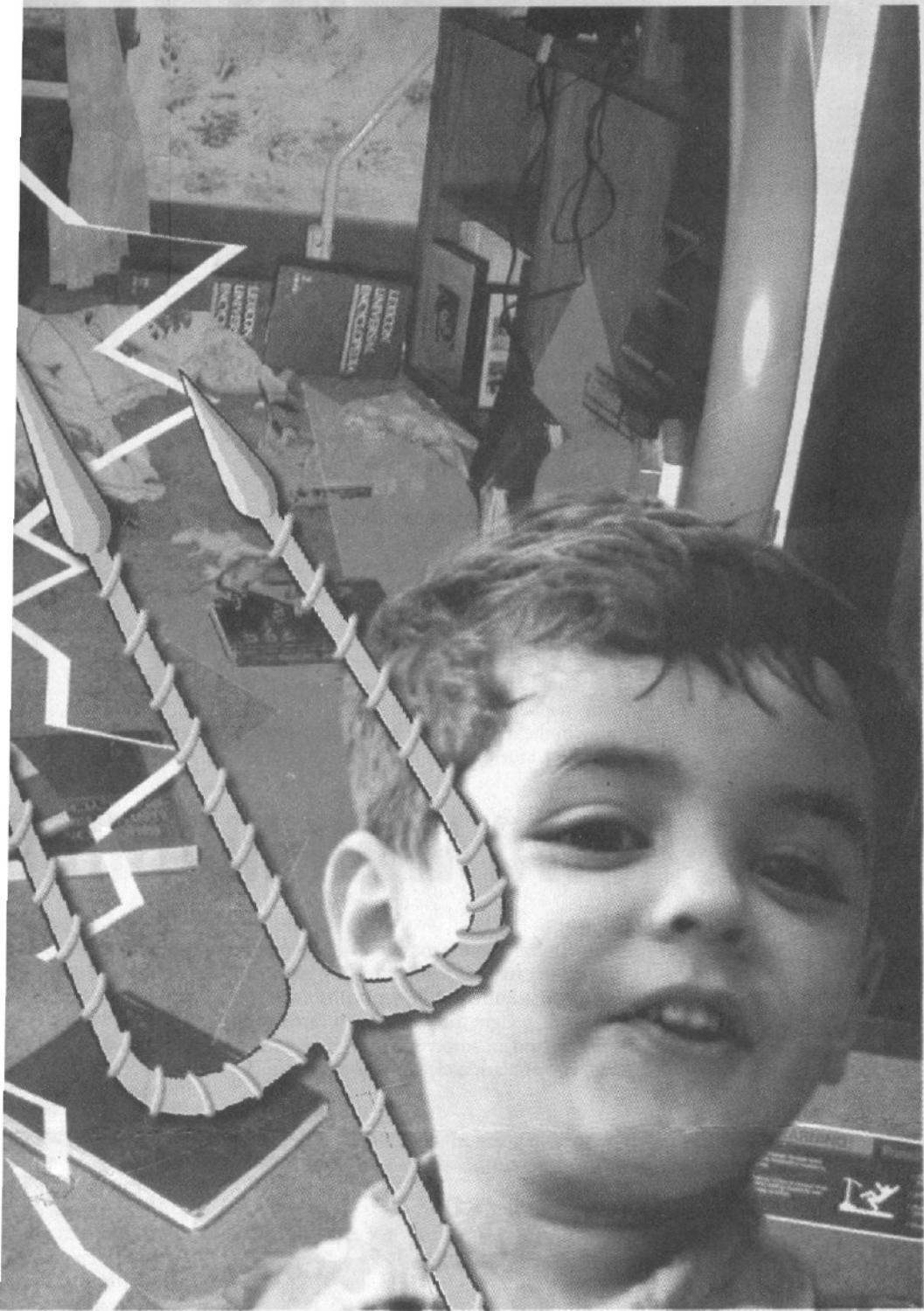
Another mistake any parent can make is assigning labels, especially within earshot of the children. Alina recalls several instances when parents of her school children have described a child as the "smart one" or the "trouble-maker."

Other actions that may spark sibling rivalry are: issuing verdicts of right or wrong during sibling fights, comparing your children, emphasising sex differences, rewarding tattling and being inconsistent with your actions.

What you can do

Your role as a parent with fighting children does not have to be limited to referee.

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There are specific steps you can take to make sibling rivalry more manageable. One of them is to give your kids permission to own their feelings.

"When kids say bad things about their brothers and

Creating a team atmosphere involves the sharing of decisions and responsibilities. Do not take this to mean a parent must give up her leadership role. Instead, she allows children to realise their significant place within the

"It's like a company reorganisation. Now there are different officers in the company," Alina says.

For a while, survival may be the mission, and you may need to draw in your resources and talk about such

everyone the feeling that there will be an opportunity to talk about problems, complaints and suggestions in a forum where everyone listens, including the parent.

Study uniqueness

Think about the gifts each of your children brings to the family. What makes your child shine? Even if those talents are not ones you particularly prize, accept and value them. Find ways to draw them out without pressuring your child to develop them. Strive to make each of your children feel special and unique.

"Trying to treat your children as equals rather than unique individuals will make you a crazy person," Alina says. And you will be disappointed in the results. "Many children spend their lives adding up the parental ledger, constantly looking for shortfalls," she says.

Perhaps you have a special-needs child in your family. Although this may change the dynamics of sibling rivalry—the whys and hows—it does not excuse it or change your need to curtail it. Parents of special-needs kids recommend managing sibling rivalry by:

Scheduling daily one-on-one times with each of your children;

Answer your children's questions about the special-needs child;

Helping siblings empathise with the special-needs child;

Involving your children with each other;

Affirming your children for the love they give to a sibling.

Take personal inventory

When considering the behaviour of your children, consider, too, your own behaviour. Do you often speak poorly of your former spouse? An immature child will pick up on what you are doing and model it, Lain says. A mature child will use it as ammunition.

"Any time we are not honest in our behaviour, saying, 'Do what I say, not what I do,' we are open for problems," Lain says.

Nurture family

Take a proactive stand to help your children become nurturing, supportive siblings. Plan activities in which your children can work together, even though they may be different from one another.

The silver lining

Sibling rivalry may still rain

There are specific steps you can take to make sibling rivalry more manageable. One of them is to give your kids permission to own their feelings.

"When kids say bad things about their brothers and sisters, we are so often tempted to not want to hear it, to argue with it and to want to punish the child immediately," Alina says. "But sometimes all they are doing is verbalising the way they feel at the moment. Let them! You are better off trying to defuse it than deny it."

Among the dozens of other suggestions Alina has found successful are the concepts of creating a family team, studying uniqueness, taking personal inventory and nurturing family.

Create a family team

Creating a team atmosphere involves the sharing of decisions and responsibilities. Do not take this to mean a parent must give up her leadership role. Instead, she allows children to realise their significant place within the family.

To begin with, you should build a mission statement, a statement of the direction that guides the day-to-day behaviour of your family. (For this, your children will need to be old enough to discuss such things as teamwork, individuality, cooperation, authority and responsibility.)

Perhaps you already have a mission statement. If it includes a spouse who is no longer living with you, revise it. When a family takes on a different form, it must rewrite its mission statement.

"It's like a company reorganisation. Now there are different officers in the company," Alina says.

For a while, survival may be the mission, and you may need to draw in your resources and talk about such things as how money will be limited this year or how you may need to go back to school or your family may need to relocate.

"We often decide we will protect the children, but the problem is they overhear things, they read things and they make up things," Alina says. "You really need to level with them, not necessarily say bad things, but lay it on the line."

Once you have settled on a mission statement, begin holding regular family meetings. These meetings give

help your children become nurturing, supportive siblings. Plan activities in which your children can work together, even though they may be different from one another.

The silver lining

Sibling rivalry may still rain on your "happy family" parade, but this cloud, too, has a silver lining. Learning how to get along with a sibling can help a child realise that he cannot always have all the advantages or the attention he wants. It often helps him cope with his own greed and jealousy and to accept his own individuality.

Do not be unrealistic, Lain says. Sibling rivalry will probably never be eliminated from a family, but it can be moderated. Your children will benefit for years from the unity you work to build now. ■