



Do we treat our kids differently?

By Maria Bellos Fisher

If you're like most parents, you place a pretty high value on "equality," which, in the parenting universe, means treating all your children the same. That concept is reinforced by practically everyone: your friends, your parents and probably most of all, your own children. Who hasn't heard the rallying cry "That's not fair!"?

But the reality is, when it comes to raising kids, playing equal is a bit of a myth, with "fair" following close behind.

Think about it: Do we treat any two people the same? We interact, communicate and react to individual personalities and temperaments. Let's remember: Everyone is different, including our children. "To treat kids respectfully, you have to be aware that they have different needs," says Jennifer Watanabe, parent educator and coach at Youth Eastside Services in Bellevue.

It's not that we don't try to be equal. When Edmonds mom Maria Thompson takes her three kids to McDonald's, she buys them all the exact same meal. "It's when they're aware of an inequity that it's important to be fair," she says.

Lynnwood mom Gabrielle Del Regno tries to measure play and privileges in equal amounts for her kids, Shea, 7, and August, 4, allowing them each 10 minutes on the swing, for example.

Often, when we say "equal," we really mean "fair," says Fred Provenzano, Ph.D., a Seattle-area child and family psychologist. "It's like when you're at Baskin-Robbins, and everyone gets the same size cone."

But sometimes fair and equal don't, well, equate. Thompson says that her 12-year-old son simply requires more of her time than her 9-year-old daughter. Her son isn't a self-starter, she says. "I have to keep priming the pump with him. Sometimes he'll continue to do his task, but he gets distracted, and I have to restart him." Her daughter, on the other hand, begins and completes things on her own. "She gets mad because I spend less time with her," Thompson says. Responding to each of her child's needs is fair — but not really equal.

Nurturing different personalities

Personality differences and temperaments — ours and theirs — play a big role in the way we interact with our children. "Temperament is the biggest thing of all," says Watanabe.

A parent's temperament is the lens through which he or she sees the child. "Parents' temperaments can help them to relate to their children at different phases in their kids' development," says Watanabe. An emotion-oriented parent, for example, might do well with small children, because she is more in tune with a small child's emotional states. A creative parent will relate well to preschool-age children as they begin to express their creativity and explore the world around them.

If family temperaments clash, there's a significant potential for

continued on page 12



continued from page 11

conflict. Let's say the three family extroverts love going out, and the one introvert prefers staying home. That creates discord, says Watanabe. How each family member deals with those kinds of conflicts is colored by individual temperaments.

"We need to use our strengths as parents, even if it means calling on another parent or friend — who might have a different temperament — for occasional backup," says Watanabe. "Parents need to understand what's happening and have realistic expectations. Temperament isn't astrology. It's real."

Other inequities

What else affects the way we relate to our kids? Perhaps Bob Dylan put it best: "The times they are a-changin'." Sure, we recognize the big cultural, generational shifts; we know that our parents, for instance, put their babies to sleep on their tummies and thought having three different television stations was pretty cool.

What we don't always see are the incremental changes that creep up on us. Let's say you let your older kids walk to school by themselves when they were younger. Today, you wouldn't dream of sending your youngest out into the wilds (your neighborhood) by herself.

Your oldest may have used the computer entirely unsupervised. With all we now know about cyber-predators, Facebook face-offs and online bullying, what conscientious parent today lets his child venture off solo into cyberspace? Hopefully, your youngest child doesn't log on without you looking over her shoulder, even though she may screech, "Not! Fair!"

Birth order is a big deal, too. "It's important to be aware of birth-order issues," says Provenzano. "We may have higher expectations for our oldest and give him more responsibility, and our youngest may not get much responsibility. We may condone some behaviors just because she's the baby."

Mountlake Terrace mom Jennifer Venema admits she's "much tougher" on her older child. "I baby my youngest more. She'll scream to get her brother in trouble, and I used to go after him, but now I investigate," she says. "It took me a while to realize I go after him just because he's older."

The younger kids (naturally!) soak up more time — which doesn't escape the notice of the older ones. "They can do the math," says Watanabe. "They know

it seems lopsided." The remedy? Praise the older sib's achievements and good behavior, and spend some extra one-on-one time with her, Watanabe suggests.

Families with special-needs kids have unique built-in inequities. Whether the child's ailment is physical, emotional or mental, that child will require more energy and attention. Venema's 15-year-old son, a diabetic, has always needed more of her time than she can give to her 11-year-old daughter, she says.

Venema says she's never treated her son with "kid gloves," and that's why her daughter doesn't complain about the extra attention he gets. Provenzano says

"Comparing kids is poison in the family"

— Laura Kastner, Ph.D.

simply telling a sibling, "I need to give your brother more time right now; you'll get special time when you need it," also helps to reduce resentment. "Our job is to foster an understanding that the special attention is about need."

Boys and girls

How does gender affect the way we interact with our children? Way back when the women's movement started, the message was: Treat girls and boys as if they were the same. These days, we realize boys and girls come with inborn differences that affect the way we relate to them.

"Boys and girls are different temperamentally," says John Rosemond, family psychologist, syndicated columnist and author. "Parents who don't want their sons to play with guns come to me and say, 'He makes sticks into guns. Why does he do that?' I say, 'He's a boy. Boys like guns.'"

Parents treat boys and girls differently from babyhood on, says Laura Kastner, Ph.D., a clinical associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington. "They must be careful not to show any partiality based on gender. If a mother is partial to her girl and the father is partial to his boy, the children's relationships with the other parent can suffer."

If the kids get less time with one parent, the inequity creates jealousies, she says. "Children vie for

power in a family; they compete for parental resources."

Gender stereotypes and expectations not only affect the way parents treat their kids, it can spill over to the siblings' behavior, says Kastner. Let's say dad doesn't like the fact that his son shows emotion. The other kids in the family pick up on that and run with it, calling their brother a "wimp." Dad's disapproval makes the teasing seem acceptable.

Evening things out

A recent article in *Time* magazine ("Playing Favorites"), suggests that while we don't treat our kids alike, we should at least try to act like we do. In other words, the less we look like we're giving special treatment to one child, the better.

It helps, for example, to set the same rules for everyone. Privileges will change, but rules shouldn't. "If I have a child with an explosive or oppositional behavior, I set the behavior plan up for all of the kids," says Provenzano. Playing by the same rules also keeps the "bad" kid from feeling singled out. "There's an element of justice," he says.

Venema's rules apply to both children. "They have the same expectations: how to treat people, how to act at school," she says. "Their chores are sexist but equal. Nick takes out the garbage and feeds the dog, and Lauren vacuums and does dishes."

Parents must be clever and strategic about appearing equal, Kastner says. If one child thinks his parents like his sibling more, he'll hate the sibling. "Don't talk up the other kid's straight A's, for example, in front of his brother," she says. Instead, praise the high achiever in private.

Try not to compare. "Comparing kids is poison in the family," Kastner says. "If you compare siblings directly in front of them, one will hate her sibling because she will perceive that you like her less." If you have a "perfect" child and a "not-so-perfect" child, make sure the "perfect" one gets rebuked, she advises, or else the not-so-perfect child will grow to hate her.

And when you hear your child grumble that big sis gets to go on dates, stay out 'til midnight, own an iPhone or enjoy other Very Special Privileges, don't hesitate to play the age card (theirs, not yours). That one works every time. ■

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