

I hated my sister!

For years Karen felt overshadowed by her younger sister. It was only when they became adults that they finally managed to repair their relationship



Karen Doherty, 47, lives in London with her husband Peter and is mother to Natasha, 15, Anya, 14, Cian, 12, and Alexandra, 10

Sibling rivalry is something I know a lot about. I was three when my sister Laura was born and my first memories of being a big sister were my parents saying, 'Be careful!', 'Stop that!', 'You'll hurt her!'

Looking back I can see they were being protective, but I hated being told off all the time.

Growing up, it became apparent my mum, in particular, seemed to favour Laura. When I complained we were treated differently, Mum would say, 'She's the baby.' There was no answer to that.

Once, when I was 10, I hit her. It's not something I'm proud of, but I was frustrated. When my mum found out she was furious – and I felt even more resentful.

As we got older, it was obvious I was more outgoing and sociable than Laura, but my parents, Jim and Pat, seemed determined I wouldn't outshine her. So when Laura

was 15, and she came home with a less than glowing report card, my parents held a special dinner. But they didn't say anything about my straight As. Later I asked 'Why didn't I get a dinner?' 'We expect you to do that well,' Mum replied.

I didn't deliberately try to cut Laura out of my life, but she was the favourite. I had more responsibility – I got lots more chores, while Laura didn't have to do anything.

It might seem unfair but I vented my frustration by ignoring Laura as much as possible. Sometimes we'd be watching TV in the same room and barely exchange a word.

My parents didn't really get involved. I think they hoped it was something that would sort itself out. Then, when I was 13, they separated. I took my dad's side while my mum and Laura became even more of a team.

I coped by burying myself in my studies and after-school sports

clubs – just doing my own thing. The upside was I got good grades and at 18 I went off to university. It was a relief to be away and not feel like I was being compared with my little sister. I got on with my own life – and Laura got on with hers. We were always civil, but there was little warmth.

That changed when I became a mum for the first time in 1995. I was so proud of my baby daughter Natasha and happy to show her off to my family. And when I saw Laura

fussing over her, I began to view her in a new light. It didn't matter what differences we'd had, my sister clearly doted on her niece.

Looking back over all the years of not talking, I realised I'd missed out. So I made an effort to see her, and to let her get to know Natasha.

Gradually, we started talking about our childhood – and that's when I started understanding what it had been like for Laura.

She'd hated being babied by our parents and felt it had held her back.

I'd never thought of it like that – I'd just felt like the black sheep. I ended up apologising to her for all the times I'd ignored her – it can't have been easy.

We've definitely got closer as we've got older. Laura lives in the US now but we email and try to talk on the phone every few weeks. She even joins my family for our summer holidays. But this year she couldn't get the time off work and I found myself missing her. Once, I could never have imagined that!

As a result, I've tried to be fair with my children, and treat them all equally. Recently, I even published a book about sibling rivalry [see right]. I was surprised to find out from my research just how many parents treat their children differently when one is older, or appears to have more going for them.

It may be tempting but I know from my own experience that it can drive a wedge between siblings that can take years to heal.



KAREN

LAURA



KAREN

LAURA



Laura Weinberg, 44, is divorced with no children and lives in Oregon in the US

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Growing up I felt I was always the little one, the one who couldn't do anything, the one who was too immature. When I was younger all I wanted from Karen was her approval. But I went about it in the wrong way. When I was upset I would go and talk to my mum, then Mum would get mad at Karen, which only made matters 10 times worse. I can see that it looked to Karen like I was telling on her.

The reason for our rivalry was because I seemed to be Mum's favourite, so it's no wonder our relationship got worse and worse.

I was the creative type and, though I always had friends, I was more introverted and shy. I read a lot, and loved art and music, which were all things my mother was interested in. This drove another wedge between me and Karen.

My mother and I both loved to sing, and when I was about 11

I was chosen to sing in our city choir, which was a great achievement. But I don't recall Karen ever acknowledging my singing in any way, other than to say she thought the only reason I liked to sing was because Mum did.

As adults, we'd spend time together but we weren't close and we always avoided discussing our childhood. We gradually started to bond after Karen had children. As we talked, we realised the things we were angry about were things our parents had unknowingly done when they raised us.

'All I wanted was Karen's approval'

Now I'm very close to Karen's children and I'm even willing to take them on all the rides at Disneyland that make Karen feel ill! It has become a running joke between us about how different we are. If I like something, Karen

is bound to dislike it, and vice versa. But we really enjoy each other's company and we can talk about anything. I feel like I have a big sister now.

● **Sibling Rivalry: Seven Simple Solutions** by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge (£12.99, Bantam Press) is out now

● Karen is a spokesperson and an ambassador for UK Youth, the country's largest charity for young people



HOW TO BUILD BRIDGES



How do you start repairing a rift that may have been there since childhood? Family psychologist Honey Lancaster

James advises:

- Try talking openly. Remember you're adults now. Squabbles and conflicts may have left their mark, but make this a new relationship.
- Make time to do things together when there isn't a major family event – like shopping or meeting up for a coffee or meal.
- For serious family disputes, there are professional counsellors to help with any kind of family dynamic. Remember you're now having a relationship of choice and not one as necessity. And if it becomes unworkable, you can choose to leave it behind.
- Go to www.honeylangcaster-james.com

Karen with husband Peter, son Cian and daughters Alexandra, Anya and Natasha

