

Brothers and sisters – a recipe for disaster or stalwart friends for life? Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge are amazed to find that sometimes the bickering never stops

SIBLING RIVALRY

once described sisters as 'a defence against life's cruel circumstances', her sister Jessica famously added, 'sisters are life's cruel circumstances.'

We found that in some families, childhood rivalries don't get any better as siblings get older. This isn't such a surprise. If you fall out with a friend, you can avoid them if you don't want to see them again. But you're stuck with your siblings, and it's easy to say things to them you'd never say to anybody else. Unless you start boycotting events, like family Christmas, your niece's wedding or your mother's 80th birthday, which can make the situation many times worse, you'll almost certainly have to see your siblings whether you want to or not.

Some siblings try to be discreet about their disagreements when they're at family gatherings. 'My sister and I had such a big argument that we didn't speak a word to each other for three years, though we saw each other countless times. We have a big family, so we just avoided each other by hiding among the others.'

But there's nothing like a family party for whipping up feelings and old grievances. A roomful of relations and a large quantity of alcohol can prove to be a lethal combination.

'We all went to Normandy for the weekend for my sister Celia's wedding. I didn't want to take any of her limelight, so I waited until Sunday to tell everyone that I was pregnant. My parents were thrilled – this would be their first grandchild. But my younger sister, who always has to be the centre of attention, started having a tantrum. She was jealous and sobbed that good things never happened to her. Honestly, she carried on like a pathetic two-year-old.'

Rivalry can start when a sibling is born, fester in childhood and be re-ignited in adulthood by even subtle triggers. All sorts of grievances can be etched upon memories: lots of people remember the tiniest details about what their brother did

A FRIEND OF OURS isn't speaking to her younger sister at the moment, and you can hardly blame her. 'My sister has had a key to my house for years, in case of emergency. A few months ago I saw her by chance and could swear she was wearing one of my jackets, but I didn't say anything. 'Well, last week I bumped into her again, and there she was – standing in my dress! I couldn't believe it. I had caught her red-handed, so she could hardly deny it. She said she wore my clothes because I had so many it wouldn't matter. How dare she help herself without even asking.'

These sisters aren't the only ones with a complicated relationship. If you scratch the surface of any rational-looking person at a dinner party, you'll almost certainly find sibling rivalry lurking in there somewhere. When we were writing our new book, *Sibling Rivalry: Seven Simple Solutions*, we assumed that people would want to talk about their children and how they fight. We were astonished by how people were so keen to complain about their own adult siblings.

Of course some brothers and sisters are the best of friends, like actress Minnie Driver and her film-producer sister Kate. 'We've got the same voice, the same nose, maybe the same eyes and laugh. And we share the same thoughts. We can look at each other across the room and know we're thinking the same thing. There's a communication that's inexplicable.'

Or writer Kathy Lette, who has three sisters. 'We fought, we schemed, we plotted, we dreamed, we laughed ourselves sick on a daily basis. Sisters are like human Wonderbras – supportive and making you look bigger and better.'

But siblings don't always share the same views. While novelist Nancy Mitford



when they were 10, but can't recall much about happier times together. Considering sibling relationships are often the longest in their lives, it's amazing how many people are still ambivalent about them.

'I'm ashamed to tell you, but I don't like my brother much,' says one friend. 'We pretend to get on for my parents' sake, but when I see him I can feel my hackles rise. I'm on guard for his little put-downs, his "helpful" advice.'

The enmity can be just as intense in half- and step-families. Jealousy and resentment can begin building up when parents get remarried and siblings feel that the other children are getting a better

children. If they're annoyed with each other I'll listen, but not take sides, until it's out of their system. I think if feelings don't build up, they'll get on better in the end.'

It's astonishing how some adults have never grown out of their old patterns. They can irritate each other, then clash or freeze each other out until the day they die. As one 65-year-old grandfather told us. 'My sister is infuriating. Always has been. So when she asks me a question, I fend her off. Whatever topic she brings up, I yawn, look bored and say, "Oh really, I never thought about it." Ha! It drives her mad.'

Bad feelings can build up to the point in some families that siblings are happy to be

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deal. 'When my father got remarried, he moved into my stepmother's house. Her children kept their own rooms and got to see my dad all the time,' one woman recalls. 'When I went to see him at weekends, I had to sleep on a pull-out sofa. I never felt part of his new family and I'm still not close to them.'

Treating children differently can lead to all sorts of difficult feelings. Lots of siblings become jealous when another child is the favourite. 'My parents were so happy to have a boy, and they showed it,' says one sister. 'There are photographs of him all over their house, but hardly any of me. I shouldn't mind, but I do. It's not his fault, but I'm still angry when I see him, and angry at my parents, too.'

Some adults still find it hard to discuss things with their siblings in a straightforward way, either because their arguments were so explosive, or they weren't allowed to bicker at all. 'When we were younger we weren't allowed to complain about our siblings or say anything unkind to them, and our parents kept telling us how much we loved each other,' another sister remembers. 'But I didn't feel that way. When my brother was vile to me I had to keep it to myself, so I had years of grievances stored up against him.'

I've tried to do it differently with my

frozen out completely. 'When my parents died, my sisters stopped speaking to me,' a friend says. 'I'm delighted. I miss my parents of course, but I don't miss family Christmas, pretending not to mind while my sisters criticise and complain about me.'

Despite hearing hundreds of complicated sibling stories, we also found there's plenty of genuine affection out there. Regardless of what may have happened in the past, many siblings share a close bond. They help each other when needed and make the effort to get on when the family comes together. Many who once had problems have become good friends, often despite their upbringing. Says one sister of her sibling, 'We talk every night on the telephone and never stop laughing. She's brilliant and I love her to bits. But we didn't get on as girls. If we argued, my mother would bang our heads together – literally. We had pigtails then, and she'd grab them and thwack us together to "knock some sense into us".'

'My sister was four years younger and I always had to mind her. I used to grumble and complain about it; I didn't want this little kid hanging around with me and my friends, but my mother insisted. It's a miracle we grew up to like each other.' ♦

SIBLING RIVALRY: SEVEN SIMPLE SOLUTIONS by Karen Doherty and Georgia Coleridge (Bantam Press, £12.99).