

## PROBLEM SITUATIONS FOR PARENTS SETTING LIMITS AND TAKING ACTION.

### *The angel and the black sheep.*

Pippa was a frustrated mother of two. She had a ten year old daughter and a four year old son.

Toby had been ill when a baby, and had developed separation anxiety from his mother partly as a result. He slept in her bed and wound himself around her legs if she tried to leave the house without him, and screamed.

Amelia was argumentative, defiant and threw screaming tantrums if she didn't get her own way. She and Toby fought pretty much all the time.

Pippa thought she was taking action, and couldn't understand what was going wrong. Life was unbearable. Day after day of fighting children, with the simplest request she made causing ongoing crises. Like the time she was trying to get out the door to go to an appointment, and she asked Amelia to turn off the television. Amelia shouted back "No" and sat sullenly beside it. Toby raced into the room, beaming. "I'll turn it off" he said. Pippa sensed disaster. She tried to talk him out of it, unsuccessfully. Toby turned it off, Amelia screamed, and hit him. He hit back, both were in tears and mother's appointment was getting harder and harder to keep. She didn't get there.

Amelia had mice. Toby let them out and then stomped on the papers in the room, hoping to squish the mice who may be hiding there. Amelia screamed. At quiet moments Amelia took her revenge and bit Toby on the arm, or somehow managed to knock his food, his cup, his toys. "I didn't mean to" she said. Pippa was bewildered. It was like living in a war zone.

Pippa had tried to set limits. On Amelia. Like many parents, Pippa had instinctively begun to explain the situation to her elder child, who, after all, had always understood that bit more than her young brother. This had started when Toby was ill as an infant, and had never stopped. Pippa had got into the habit of explaining things to Amelia and expecting her to help out. When Amelia was defiant, or hurt Toby, Pippa would try to use limit setting and time out, and explain to Amelia once again that she was the eldest and she had to understand that Toby was only four, and that she should not hit him, and should just tell him nicely that he was not to let her mice out, or stomp on them. He was only young, and he didn't understand, and she should be a better sister to him. Toby smiled. He polished his halo.

When I spoke to Amelia she was seething with resentment and full of guilt and misery. She was measuring as well above average on the Children's Depression Inventory. She said she felt like a demon when she got angry.

What has gone wrong?

### **TAKING ACTION WITH SIBLINGS**

Older children can use language more effectively than their younger brothers and sisters. But they cannot take up adult roles with their brothers and sisters. The older child still needs parental help in learning to manage their feelings and cope with the difficult situations that can develop between brothers and sisters. If parents forget this, and turn to the older child to help too often, the older child can develop symptoms of stress, such as:

- **defiance**
- **tantrums and inability to manage anger**
- **symptoms of anxiety such as bedwetting, clingy behaviour, sleeping problems.**
- **constant complaints of unfairness**

- **strong dislike of, and aggression to, the younger sibling, which seems constant and ongoing.**

The younger sibling is also in an unsatisfactory position. He is protected from good limit setting and demands for appropriate growing up skills, by his parents perception that he is the baby of the family. He gets to do a lot of what he likes, some of which he should not be doing. He doesn't get much practice at learning to tolerate frustration and sometimes becomes quite powerful. He learns fairly quickly from about two onwards that he can easily get praise from the parent by doing the things his sibling refuses to do, and being the "good" one. He is always quiet if his sibling is angry and screaming. He offers to give her something so she feels better, he does the things for the parent she has refused to do. His parent is bemused as to why the older child just cannot get along with this little angel.

It is important to remember that the younger child is merely doing what comes naturally. He is too young to reflect on the moral nature of his actions - he cannot do that until he is in adolescence. He is only doing what children do best, trying to get the love and attention of parents in any way he can find.

The younger sibling shows symptoms of this good child-bad child problem as well. He:

- **throws tantrums when many of those his age are ceasing to do so**
- **doesn't cope well with his peers, generally being too bossy and controlling**
- **is sneaky.**

The good child-bad child problem can affect the developing skills of both children. Parents can take some simple and effective actions.

- Remember that most quarrels take two. It may not look like it, but take a closer look. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were having an argument with your spouse, friend or parent about something you felt was unfair, or even because you felt grumpy, and in comes a friend and says to your spouse, friend or parent, *don't worry - I'll do it for you*. This apparently friendly act is not really a friendly act as it cuts across your feelings completely. In fact it is an aggressive act, and this is how children view it as well. Children who practise the art of being goody goody often incite the anger of their siblings, for good reasons.
- Act to prevent one child showing the other up. Set a limit that one child is not to interfere when you are talking to the other. Make it clear to both children that you are doing the parenting (and you don't need any help!).
- Try to make sure that you ensure both children are learning the kind of skills you want them to have as adults. The defiant child does need to learn more about enjoying cooperation, the good child more about trusting that you care for him whether he is good or not. Encourage one child to talk about ways you can learn to work together, and set limits to assist this learning, and encourage the other child to let you take care of situations without his or her help.