



SIBLING BOND

Our relationship with our siblings is a complex one. But, says Emma Cook, understanding the dynamics can help bring your relationship to a new level

Photographs by Jochen Braun



◀ other's buttons without knowing why or how, and recast themselves in childhood roles that never worked for them in the first place.'

A unique intimacy

Even those siblings who describe their relationship as close can find it hard to move on from these enduring roles. 'Shona has become one of my closest friends,' says Marie, 32, 'but I'll still always be the sensible, successful older sister who makes her feel inadequate, and she will always be my cooler, more confident younger sister who makes me feel drab in comparison. Our younger brother, meanwhile, isn't close to either of us. He's just very different, and far more conventional.'

Yet Avi Schmueli, therapist at the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships, believes there is no such thing as simply not 'clicking' with a sibling, or feeling indifferent. 'If we don't keep in touch or don't get on, there are unconscious issues to do with upbringing.

How parents get on with one another is at the heart of every sibling relationship.'

Gina's parents divorced when she was a teenager. Her father was aggressive and her brother Simon is, she says, similar. 'Although we were close while my parents were breaking up, I can't forgive him now for the way he behaves towards *his* wife. He treats her so badly and it reminds me of how my mum must have felt,' she says.

In such situations, it's tempting to withdraw and invest our energy in other relationships. But, says Reibstein, even if siblings give up on their relationship, they'll never reconcile themselves to the loss. It is far better to try to find common ground. 'Above all, try to recognise the good qualities in your siblings and reach a common understanding,' she says. 'You can both have had terrible experiences of your family, or good ones – it doesn't matter. What's key is that feeling of coming through something together and learning to value that unique intimacy.'



WE HAVE THE SAME HANG-UPS

Cate Mackenzie (left), 36, is a life coach and artist living in London. Her sister, Georgia Mackenzie, 33, is an actress. She is married and also lives in London. Their middle sister, Tara, 35, is an artist living in Wiltshire. They grew up in London.

CATE Our mother had three children in four years. As children we had the same friends, we shared a room, and we fought over clothes and mess. You can't hide anything living like that. Of course we argued, and with three, there are always times when it's two against one, but that changes around. At the moment, Georgia and I live close by and we see each other about once a week, whereas Tara has children and lives in the countryside so we don't see her as often.

As the eldest, I felt I had to take care of the other two, but in our twenties and thirties that's balanced out. In recent years I've been able to turn to Georgia for support, and especially relationship advice – sisters are able to be honest with each other in a way other people can't be. She's also very generous. When she got her first acting job, she gave Tara and me a chunk of the money each. That really

struck me at the time because that might have been her first and last job. But she thought, I'm doing well and I want my sisters to share in it.

GEORGIA As the youngest, I definitely got away with more because the

mistakes had already been made. But there were also things I missed out on because I was too young to join in, such as going away as teenagers. Now we're older, I enjoy being able to look after them for a change. I guess I feel guilty about how much



Cate (right) and Georgia (left) aged six and three, with their mother Tina and sister Tara

I used to get away with.

But that's what's so good about having sisters – they understand your hang-ups and issues because they were there: they've got the same hang-ups too. There are certain issues only my sisters understand. They had the same upbringing. They take for granted the same things I take for granted. They've never not been in my life.

ANYONE WITH BROTHERS and sisters will have intense memories of sibling crimes committed against them. One friend remembers the time her two elder sisters urged her to drink a glass of 'strawberry juice', only for her to discover it was blood drained from raw meat lurking in the family fridge. And my mother still recalls the time she stuck chewing gum in her sister's fringe, which had to be cut off, all because she was envious of her glossy black mane. Even though she and her sister are now in their seventies, these sibling resentments still play themselves

HOW TO PARENT SO YOUR CHILDREN GET ALONG

As parents, we have a greater influence than we realise over how our children get on, says Claire Halsey, clinical psychologist and parenting expert. She advises on how to help them connect.

- Encourage your children to communicate with one another from the earliest moments. While a baby is still young, ask your older child what they could be thinking, does he/she think they are warm or cold, hungry or thirsty? This encourages empathy in the older sibling.
- Don't feel you have to intervene when siblings squabble. Remember, the more you try and settle arguments, the less chance siblings have to learn how to resolve conflicts. It may be irritating to watch, but arguing is essential for children; it's where they learn to negotiate and compromise.
- Never compare one sibling to another, ie 'Look he's finished all his tea, why can't you be more like Jack and eat everything?' Favouritism of any sort is one of the most destructive of influences. Developmentally, for children between five and 10 years old, fairness is a powerful concept and to respect their siblings, they need to feel that their parents are treating each of them equally.
- Be aware of your own hopes and desires and to what extent you're imprinting these on your child. Don't assume your values are the right ones and that your child has to follow them.

