

brothers

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DIVAKARUNI

Why
do my kids
want to rip each
other to
SHREDS ?



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after the birth of our first child, Anand, my husband, Murthy, and I weren't sure if we wanted a second baby. Being one-time parents had already thrown our lives off-kilter. We were a little afraid about doing it all over again.

"Oh come on," said our intrepid friends with two, three, even four offspring. "It's not that hard. In fact, it's easier, because they play with each other, and then you don't have to wrack your brain trying to amuse them every waking moment."

Not realizing that they were part of an enormous conspiracy, the motto of which was Misery Loves Company, we believed them.

"That's right," said Murthy. "If it were that hard, people all over the world wouldn't be having so many kids."

I agreed. It was bound to be easier. Hadn't I already learned to do with no sleep? Didn't I know the address of every Toys R Us and Chuck E Cheese in the Bay area? I could change diapers with one hand tied behind my back. If they had a baby-burping contest, I'd be -- if not the winner -- at least the runner-up. But most important, I'd be giving Anand the best gift possible, a little brother to love and cherish and play with. A family bond that would continue long after we, his parents, were dead.

What I didn't know was that two children don't produce twice as much work, or even three or four times as much. They produce utter chaos. Not only do you have to prepare two completely different meals for them (and another one for yourself, unless you're

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inclined to night after night of pancakes, French toast, Pop-Tarts or hot dogs), they want them both at the same time. No, actually, each wants his first. They also want the same toy, the same book and your lap (your whole lap) at the same time. (But never the same TV show -- they never want that.) And they're ready to kill to get their own way.

OK, I'm exaggerating. But only a little. Consider this scene, not untypical at our home: Our several dinners are done; the kitchen, which looked, half an hour back, as though a tornado had hit a ketchup factory, is clean again; on the couch, Murthy is reading an episode from "The Children's Ramayana" to Anand and Abhay. (The boys look so angelic sitting there beside their daddy that I want to take a picture -- except one of them threw the camera into the Bay last month when we took them to see the Golden Gate Bridge.) I feel it's safe to go for a quick shower.

Halfway through my shower, I hear the blood-curdling yells. I wrap a towel around my soapy body and run to the family room. (Experience has taught me that at times like this, the ratio of adults to children has to be at least 1-to-1.) Anand, who is 6, is sitting on Abhay, pummeling him. Abhay, a scrappy 3, responds by biting. Now there's a semicircle of teeth-marks on Anand's arm. They're both screaming as loudly as they can and don't even hear their father shouting at them to stop. Finally, Murthy grabs the big one and I grab the little one. We forcibly separate them and give them time outs in their rooms, then collapse on the couch. I'm depressed the rest of the evening and sleep badly that night.

My children's violence doesn't seem to bother anyone else as much as it does me. Especially as both boys are fairly well-behaved with other children, polite even. Their pediatrician thinks it's a growth phase. Their father, though he'd like them to be more amicable, believes that's how boys relate to each other. My mother thinks it's the effect of American TV. My friends tell me it's just something you have to grit your teeth and put up with. An older uncle from India says, "One good caning and you'll never have that happen again." But I think they're all missing something central about the problem.

Perhaps because I'm a writer, I remember the stories. Each culture has them. In the Western tradition, it's the story of Cain and Abel; in the Indian, it's the story of Sugreev and Vali, two princes of the monkey tribe. Both stories end in betrayal, death and enormous suffering. As with many of the stories that have come down to us from mythic times, I feel they are at once a

warning about one of humanity's greatest taboos and a pointer into a particularly dark part of our psyche. What is it in us that makes us more jealous of our siblings than of others? Why do we feel we can behave toward them in ways we'd never dream of behaving toward our friends? Why, where they're concerned, can we not control our rage?

My children have no answer either.

"But why did you hit him?" I say to Anand.

"He started it first."

"Why'd you start it?" I ask Abhay.

He stares at me for a while, considering. Then he says, "Bad mommy."

"Don't you love each other?" I ask. But already I know they do. If they're apart even for a day, they can't stand it. Anand saves his favorite foods -- Froot Loops and peanut butter cookies -- to give Abhay when he returns. Abhay searches in every closet and under every bed to see where Anand has disappeared to.

"Be gentle with each other, OK?" I say. "Remember, you only have one brother. If you break him, you're not going to get another one."

"OK, mommy," they say in chorus.

Perhaps it's because the sibling relationship is the first, the most intense and the most continuous one we experience with someone who's of the same generation that it breeds so much conflict. Perhaps the progression of that relationship is the truest yardstick of our growth and maturity.

I watch my children walk away from me, hand-in-hand. Maybe some of what I've said has sunk in. Maybe that's the right solution, talking calmly and logically, like the intelligent beings we humans are.

Then suddenly Abhay gives his brother a push, and Anand chases him. Roars and squeals and thumps and an ear-rending scream. I sigh as, Sisyphus-like, I start on my uphill journey once again.

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