

Chapter 21

Visit 14:

Siblings *With* Rivalry!

Jacob Grant's behavior is gradually getting better, thanks to months of really hard work by his parents. Their sensitive, responsive, insightful interaction with Jacob has helped him become a better, more mature emotional thinker.

- Bedtime routines are solid and night waking is no more. Check.
- Sleep and morning routines have been. . .well. . . routine for a while. Check.
- Jacob is getting himself dressed and 'taking care of himself like a big boy' with one exception: He is still not completely toilet trained. No check. (See *Chapter 22, Visit 15: Toilet Training*).
- Our strategy of pulling off the road ended dangerous misbehavior in the car. Check.
- There are many fewer tantrums and hassles in public. Check. (Julie only had to give out one of the 'autism cards' (See *Chapter 20, Visit 13: Outings and Eating*).
- And the Grants are able to go out to restaurants without a lot of anxiety. Check.

Jacob's Daily Problems

- ✓Bedtime routines/night waking
- ✓Morning routine/Getting ready for school
- ✓Self help—dressing, brushing teeth.
- ✓Car misbehavior
- ✓Meltdowns in public: Grocery shopping
- ✓Dinner time and Eating problems
- ❑Sibling rivalry & sharing
- ❑Toilet Training

But. . . there was one last and major vestige of behavioral difficulty, namely

worsening sibling rivalry issues including especially continued problems with sharing and almost constant squabbling. It had gotten to a crisis level.

What precipitated the crisis ironically was not Jacob but Charlie! Once cute little Charlie, now nearly 3 years old, had learned how to push Jacob's buttons things started really spiraling out of control. We scheduled a visit.

Autism and Sibling Issues

That Charlie and Jacob were just now entering into a new phase together was not surprising. The relationship between a child with ASD and his or her sibling(s) evolves and is guaranteed to *not* be typical. Let me count the ways:

- There are often **role reversals** where the younger sibling becomes more functional and acts more like an older sibling to the child with ASD.
- There is often a **sense of loss** and confusion among the typical sibs when their brother or sister with ASD rejects them and won't play.
- **Resentment** among (especially older) siblings is common because they see their brother with ASD as getting unfair attention or as not having to follow the rules they have to follow.
- The child with ASD can be loud, intrusive, obsessive, pestering, demanding, and/or unpredictable, which can be very **annoying** to his sibs whose feelings of resentment (and subsequent **guilt**) are often not recognized at all or ignored.
- Older sibs are frequently **embarrassed** when their brother or sister with ASD acts 'weird' in public or with their typical friends (though to be fair, some siblings are wonderfully

accepting and nurturing of their brother or sister with ASD and teach their friends to be more tolerant.)

- Finally, it is frequently the case that the child with ASD gets aggressive over the slightest intrusion by his cute younger brother.

And when sibling relationships deviate from normal, parents are often at a loss. Parents want ‘normal’ sibling relationships so badly that they miss the deep negative feelings (resentment, guilt, jealousy, anger) of the other children in the family. They expect the typical siblings to ‘suck it up’, ‘understand’, ‘be nice’ and ‘share’. When parents deny, suppress, or ignore these feelings it commonly leads to misbehavior from the *typical* sibs and chaos in the family system. I see it all the time. That’s when I get a call like the one from Julie Grant asking to talk about ‘problems with sharing’. Jacob was getting very aggressive over the slightest intrusion by his cute younger brother, Charlie. After all, I did recommend that Jim and Julie ‘protect’ Jacob from his younger brother when Charlie was a toddler. Julie and Jim both felt strongly that it was time Jacob learned to share. . .

Jacob and Charlie: The Early Days

As I waited for the Grants to come in for their appointment I thought back on how Jacob and Charlie’s relationship had evolved over the last couple of years. It wasn’t a pretty picture.

Crying. When Charlie was born, Jacob was not quite 2 years old. He was in the throes of autism, locked into his own world and, for the most part, oblivious of his newborn brother. Except, that is, when the new baby Charlie cried.

Jacob had auditory sensitivities. He hated loud sudden noises. Charlie’s crying

‘drove Jacob nuts’ causing him to have multiple daily temper tantrums, which in turn caused his mother, Julie, to be on edge whenever Charlie made a peep.

Julie developed a number of resourceful strategies. She was very quick to soothe Charlie; she distracted Jacob by putting him in a gated room with his favorite videos; and she kept as much distance between the crying baby and his brother as the house would allow. When Jim was home he would sometimes have to take baby Charlie for a ride in the car until Charlie fell asleep. Thank goodness Charlie was not a colicky or fussy baby.

“Not Natural”. As long as Charlie was quiet, Jacob was oblivious to his brother’s existence.

In fact, this lack of relationship with Charlie was one of the prime reasons the Grants sought an evaluation that led to the diagnosis of Jacob’s autism. As Jim Grant said to me at one of our early visits, “It just wasn’t natural for a two year old to take no interest in his baby brother.”

Over the next year, this became a source of sadness for both Jim and Julie who of course wanted the brothers to be close. It was also a constant reminder and a barometer of how affected Jacob was by his autism.

As Jacob began to respond to intervention, he began—slowly—to acknowledge his brother’s existence. He even started to interact with him a little; but, for the most part, until Charlie was 10 months old the brothers lead parallel lives. Jacob was so disconnected to the world that he didn’t mind Charlie occasionally coming in to his space or even grabbing a toy. Jacob just moved on to find another toy or just wander.

Crawling. Then Charlie started to crawl! Jacob, who mostly just wanted to be left alone to line up trains or flip through his books, became at first annoyed, then angry, and finally furious to find his brother constantly in *his* space. And Charlie only wanted to do whatever his big brother was doing. This was the true beginning of their sibling conflicts.

Jacob's parents felt that Jacob should learn to share with his brother but Jacob disagreed. At first he pushed little Charlie out of his space, then he slapped at him whenever Charlie even tried to touch his toys. The parents yelled at Jacob: 'Jacob, this is your brother Charlie. Let him play with you!' But Jacob had no intention of letting this little, intrusive, annoying stranger in to his private play. As Julie said at the time: "I was so sad that they couldn't play like regular brothers, I cried."

Charlie tolerated the pushing and even the slapping pretty well. Of course he'd cry which upset Jacob even more but Charlie was easy enough to distract and happy to play with separate toys, so the conflict was limited.

Walking. Until, that is, a couple of months later when Charlie began to walk. And he was quick! Before Julie knew it, he was getting into Jacob's space and going after Jacob's toys. Charlie went even faster when his parents said 'No!'. (The little stinker.) Jacob's annoyance was growing to the point of neurosis. He was always looking over his shoulder and ready to attack Charlie if he ever came within reach. Eventually, he became unpredictably dangerous, randomly pushing Charlie down or hitting him even if Charlie was not going for his toys. Despite Julie's efforts to get him to share, Jacob did not understand the concept. All

he knew was that his autistic privacy was being invaded.

It was a sad situation. Charlie desperately held on to his toys and, when Jacob ripped the toys away, Charlie protested, then tantrumed. Throughout the day little Charlie, clutching his match box cars or his super hero figures could be seen trying to toddle away from his much faster older brother who would overtake him, wrestle the toy from Charlie's grip and run away to play.

Attack! Then, one day, without warning Jacob viciously attacked Charlie biting him badly, pushing him down, and kicking him in the back and the head! Julie was horrified. She ran to Charlie who was hysterically crying, swooped him away from Jacob who, according to an angry Julie, showed no remorse whatsoever. Julie yelled at him and Jacob 'got a good spanking'. I got an urgent phone call.

The note on Jacob's chart read: "Julie Grant called. Urgent. Please call back asap." As soon as I had a break, I called back. Julie had calmed herself down but was still very upset. This was the first of a series of conversations (and office visits) that we would have about sibling issues over the next couple of years. She was especially upset with herself for not protecting Charlie and she was furious with Jacob as well as truly worried about him.

Mom: "I don't know how I could have let this happen. You should have seen him. My poor little Charlie with bites and bruises. You should have seen the look on his face. He was so confused. He adores his big brother."

Me: "Jacob really went after him."

Mom: "I've told him over and over that this is his little brother and he has to share."

Me: “I don’t think he can really understand that.”

Mom: “Nothing is easy with him. How he could do this to his own brother!”

Me: “Actually, Julie, this is very common.

Mom: “It is?”

Me: “Please, don’t blame yourself and really at some level it’s not Jacob’s fault either. Blame the autism. What you have, with Charlie beginning to walk and Jacob wanting to ‘keep the world the same’, is a perfect storm. Don’t get me wrong. I think it’s terrible too that Jacob attacked his brother but if you look at it from Jacob’s point of view it makes some sense.”

Mom: “I don’t like feeling this angry with Jacob.”

In fact, this scenario *is* very common. When a younger sibling is a toddler and an older brother has autism, the irresistible force meets the immovable object and there is a clash. Jacob is the immovable object. He wants his world to be predictable, orderly, to stay put. Now here comes the irresistible force toddling up without asking, without warning, and changes everything all of a sudden.”

Typically developing siblings as young as 2-3 years old have a ready-made desire to please their parents, a developing conscience, and a love-hate relationship with their younger siblings. And *typically developing siblings* will often be (or feel like being) aggressive to their younger siblings (often cloaked in very tight hugs!). They know somehow naturally that they are supposed to love their little brother or sister but they are jealous and angry at the same time for having to share mom with this new intruder.

When I was a general pediatrician and a new mom would tell me how jealous the 2 year old sibling was I would say to her: “Just imagine your husband bringing a

new woman into the house and telling you, ‘Don’t worry darling, you’ll learn to love her just as much as I do.’ That’s what it’s like for the older sibling.” This love/hate ambivalence toward a new baby in the family is universal.

Children with autism, however, may not have the built-in natural controls of typical children and they commonly don’t have an understanding that they are supposed to love their little brother or sister. It’s not even about jealousy.

For the child with autism ‘keeping the world the same’ is their top priority. At some level they may understand that their parents get upset when they get aggressive toward their sib but when the child with autism’s insular world is threatened and falls apart, they get very anxious, they act on impulse, and they can become quite aggressive. I explained all this to Julie and she seemed to understand though she admitted to having residual anger.

Me: “I’m afraid Jacob is not going to learn to tolerate Charlie’s intrusions without some help.”

Mom: “When Jim sees those bite marks and bruises he’s going to flip out.”

Me: “It won’t do much good to keep punishing Jacob for what he did in the past though we will definitely discipline him for aggression in the future.”

Mom: “Good, because I won’t put up with what he did to Charlie.”

Me: “It’s not really his fault, Julie. And it’s not your fault. You’ll see. Within a few weeks he’ll be much better. We just have to give him more control at first and then he’ll come around.”

Mom: “I hope so. Now Charlie is leery of his own brother.”

Me: “Charlie will be ok. But we have to be vigilant and we have to give the same consistent message. We’re going to use

this problem to help Jacob grow emotionally.”

Mom: “He better. Or else! I’ll call Amy and set up a time to talk about this.”

Me: “Make sure you bring in the boys and Jim.”

Promote Maturity Through Sibling Rivalry

Recent studies in child development reveal that the importance of siblings in shaping a person’s lifelong development has been severely underestimated. Our children’s attitudes toward boundaries, competition, conflict resolution, fairness, sharing, loyalty, and intimacy are profoundly shaped in long lasting ways by sibling relationships.

Families can and should use the sibling relationship to promote the developmental and emotional potential within the child with autism and help him or her become more tolerant, socially appropriate, and more emotionally sophisticated. *In short, through sibling conflict, we can help the child with autism become more mature.*

Sibling Rivalry Office Visit #1

So, when Jacob was about 3 (See *Chapter 10, Visit 5: Moving Up*) and Charlie was around 15 months old we had the first of several conversations about ‘sibling rivalry’. It was about two years ago now but it went so badly, I remember it well. (I’m reconstructing the conversation from memory and from notes at the time.)

The Grants rolled in to my playroom and, as I recall, it took about 15 seconds for the rivalry to begin as both boys headed right for the yellow drawer full of little match box cars they had played with the last time, including a set of highly desirable (especially for Jacob) ‘Cars’ characters—Lightning McQueen, Mack the semi, and Mader the tow truck.

First they jockeyed for position, nudging each other, with Charlie, who was still toddling and at a clear physical disadvantage, getting elbowed by Jacob until he fell down crying which only made Jacob more annoyed at which point Jacob started kicking Charlie hard in the side as if to say ‘Stop crying! You’re so loud!’ Charlie screamed in real pain.

It all happened so fast. Julie gave me the ‘I’m so sorry but this is my life’ look. I immediately jumped up from my chair and grabbed Jacob by the arm firmly but gently to stop him from kicking Charlie. Jim picked up Charlie who wanted his mommy. As I firmly guided Jacob over to the chair in the corner, I spoke in my deep, loud, doctor voice.

Me: “Jacob, you may *not* hurt Charlie in my office. No kicking! No hurting! And now you can’t play with the cars.”

Jacob (without a shred of remorse at what he had done) screamed, cried, and chanted at the top of his lungs: ka-ka-ka-ka, his word for ‘car’. I worried that the whole building complex would hear him. We waited and waited and waited but the boys didn’t settle down. Jacob was totally focused on getting the cars. Charlie was getting over being hurt but now *he* wanted to get to the cars before Jacob did. Both boys were crying, loud. I stood up, got right in their faces and spoke loudly and dramatically. My intention was to join their wish and reflect their feelings.

Me (loudly): “Who wants to play with cars? Jacob, *you* want to play with the cars! Charlie, *you* want to play with the cars!”

It was like a miracle, like turning a faucet off. They both stopped crying.

Dad: “Wow. I’m impressed.”

The boys looked hopeful. I repeated myself.

Me: “Who wants to play with cars? Jacob, you want to play with the cars! Charlie, you want to play with the cars! OK. You can play with cars but *Jacob*, no hitting Charlie. If you hit, no cars. If you hit you go in the chair.”

Mom: “He really seemed to understand that.”

Me: “There’s a glimmer. We’re going to *use* the sibling rivalry to help Jacob understand his feelings, your feelings, Charlie’s feelings, the rules about hitting, and the consequences, what happens when you break the rules. We haven’t talked yet about The Good, The Bad & The Ugly but that’s a discussion we should have soon.” (See *Chapter 16, Visit 10: The Good, The Bad, & The Ugly*).

Then I divvied up the cars quickly and equally. Luckily I had two Lightning McQueens and Charlie didn’t really care if he got the ‘Cars’ characters; he just wanted a seat at the table, so to speak. Jacob played in one area and Charlie in another area of the room. We got through the crisis; we could talk.

Mom: “We’ve been through this so many times. When is he going to learn to share?”

Dad: “I’ve spanked his butt; I did what you did—put him in a chair; I’ve taken his toys away and nothing seems to make a dent. He just doesn’t get it. He keeps hurting Charlie and it’s really pissing me off, excuse the language.”

Me: “I understand being fed up with it all but you’re right. Jacob doesn’t get it because he *can’t* get it.”

I explained to Jim and Julie that though Jacob was 3 years old, his functional developmental level was still at the level of a 1 year old (See *Chapter 10, Visit 5: Moving*

Up). In other words, as much as I hated to say it (I knew it would upset Jim and Julie), he and Charlie were about the same developmental age. And one year olds are not going to understand ‘if-then’ reasoning (i.e. if you push Charlie you won’t be able to play), ‘sharing’, or any other abstract concept. After dozens of repeated experiences Jacob would begin to understand that when he hit Charlie he would have to go to the time out chair. But that could take a long time and Charlie would have a lot of bruises. We had to have a better plan.

Protecting Jacob?

Me: “So, the first step is to make sure that *Jacob* is protected from Charlie’s intrusions.”

Both Jim and Julie were incredulous.

Mom: “You want us to protect Jacob *from* Charlie?”

Me: “Yep. For the next week I want you to stop Charlie from getting into Jacob’s play space.”

Mom: “Every time?”

Me: “Every time. We’ll get Jacob to accept Charlie but, just in the beginning, I want Jacob to see that he is safe. I also want Jacob to feel understood. I want you to ‘speak for Jacob’.”

Mom: “What do you mean?”

Me: “What is Jacob thinking when his brother gets close to his toys?”

Mom: “Probably ‘Keep that kid away from my trains’.”

Me: “That’s right. But I want you to use words that Jacob might say if he could talk; something like “Mommy, no Charlie.” Or “You want *Charlie* to go *bye-bye*’.”

Mom: “I get it now. Speak for Jacob.”

Me: “That way he’ll feel understood which will help him calm down (and it will help his language too).”

When all this started, Jacob was just beginning to understand simple concepts. All he understood was: 'Here comes that intruder, Charlie. He is going to mess up my trains again and I hate it when he does that and I'm going to stop him. If he keeps on coming I'm going to attack him.' In other words Jacob was not capable of understanding the concept of 'sharing'.

Protecting Jacob?

- What is Jacob's functional developmental profile? Can he really understand 'sharing'?
- When Charlie goes toward Jacob's space, go with him. Don't let him intrude!
- Read Jacob's cues and 'speak for him': "Charlie no! I'm playing. Go bye bye."
- When Charlie gets sad point this out to Jacob.
- Then 'tussle' with Jacob and see if he will let Charlie play 'just a little'. Promote interacting.
- Discipline Jacob for any aggression.

He didn't even understand how to use words to say 'No!' And he didn't care if he hurt Charlie or upset mom. Because of his autism, those empathic feelings weren't natural to Jacob, yet. But I knew that the potential for empathy was hidden within him—if, that is, we approached Jacob the right way.

Mom: "But Charlie is not going to be happy."

Me: "So then you'll point that out to Jacob. 'Charlie is sad. Charlie wants to play too. Please Jacob. Can Charlie play a little?' I want you to 'tussle' with Jacob. Show him that Charlie's not such a bad guy. That it really won't hurt anything if he plays a little, just a little. Wear him down and show him that Charlie can sit there near the trains, Charlie can hold a train, Charlie can put a train on the track."

Mom: "And Jacob gets a look on his face that could kill."

Me: "Well let's see. Let's do it right now."

Mom (getting anxious): "But they're being so good."

Me: "We'll start by just *talking* about it and see what happens. Our goal is to just open up the discussion, so to speak, and see if we can get Jacob to tolerate Charlie first coming closer, then maybe interacting a little, and then maybe playing a little. But you're going to have to be there. You can't just expect it to happen."

Dad: "I see. It's a step-by-step process. We were going too fast and expecting too much."

Me: "Correct! You must always match your expectations to the child's developmental level. I call this the 'philosophy of can'. Can the child do it? If they *can't* we have to work at a lower level, which is what we're doing now."

The boys were playing nicely by themselves. I asked mom to pick up Charlie and sit on the floor by Jacob, which she did. Charlie was happy when they went over to Jacob's space. Jacob seemed OK with it too. . . so far.

Me: "Now read Jacob's gestures and facial cues closely and join him in what he's doing. What is he doing?"

Mom: "He's playing cars."

Me: "Simply *mirror in words* what he's doing and include Charlie. *Don't ask questions; make statements*. What he's doing is a statement, not a question."

Mom (holding Charlie in her lap): "Look Charlie, Jacob is putting the cars in a row."

Me: "Perfect, momma! Now point to each car and name the colors in a sing songy voice".

Mom: "Red, red, blue, yellow, green!"

At that moment Jacob looked up and gave mom a great smile. Charlie liked it too.

Me: "OK. Dad, hurry. Give Charlie a car to give to Jacob (which he did). OK, now mom, tell Charlie to give the car to Jacob

and help him. Just offer it and see if Jacob wants it.”

Mom (holding Charlie’s hand with the car in it): “Charlie, give Jacob the car. Here Jacob, another car for you. From Charlie! Charlie, give the car to Jacob.”

Me: “When he gives it, give Charlie another car and keep the interaction going.”

Jacob took the car from Charlie! Charlie got another car and leaned forward to put the car in the row that Jacob was forming but Jacob did *not* like that and frowned.

Me: “That’s OK. Stay with it, mom. Jacob is using gestures to communicate. I call that ‘good negative’ behavior. It’s better than hitting, biting and kicking. So tell Jacob’s feelings to Charlie: ‘No no Charlie. Jacob doesn’t want you to line up. No lining up, Charlie.’”

Mom: “And now Charlie will lower his little head and start to cry.”

Which is exactly what Charlie did.

Me (to Jacob): “Oh Charlie is sad, Jacob.”

Dad: “He doesn’t care at all. He just went right back to lining up the cars.”

Me: “He doesn’t care yet. But look what happened here. *We got the boys to interact without aggression. We’re teaching Jacob that his gestural communication matters and we’re putting words on them. We’re tuning him in to Charlie’s feelings.* I’d say we accomplished a lot.”

Dad: “And how long is it going to take for them to play like real brothers?”

Me: “You can’t push this river, dad. But when Jacob sees that Charlie is not going to ruin his play—because we are protecting Jacob from Charlie—he’ll be more tolerant. The key here is to keep working on Jacob’s development so that he moves up to the higher functional levels. Then he’ll be able to understand more and more and he and Charlie will be great play buddies.”

Mom: “I can’t wait for that.”

Me: “It’s going to happen but you have to go slow. It will take weeks to months. Protect Jacob as we did here. Honor his feelings. Go slow. He’ll let Charlie in. You can also play with Charlie near Jacob and see if Jacob wants to join your play.”

Mom: “We do that. But then Jacob just wants to take *our* toys for himself.”

Me: “Do you let him?”

Dad: “*She* does, I don’t. She let’s Jacob take Charlie’s toys and then when Charlie get’s upset she distracts him to something else.”

Me: “Keeping the peace, eh? Well, that might work for a while but it’s not fair to Charlie. We have to have the same rules for both boys. It won’t be long before Charlie gets resentful.”

Mom: “I know but I just don’t want to hear any more of Jacob’s screaming.”

Me (to dad): “We’ll let her keep the peace for now since Charlie is OK with it but pretty soon she’ll be calling to say that Charlie’s behavior is getting worse.”

Jim and I have a little laugh together.

Mom: “Hello. I’m sitting here listening to you guys talk about me.”

Postscript. In a follow up phone call, Julie Grant admitted that, at first, both she and Jim (especially Jim) were skeptical—they didn’t think it was right to let Jacob hoard his toys. But after less than a week of ‘protecting Jacob’, Jacob calmed down and was much less vigilant. Jacob’s pushing, hitting, and/or kicking of his little brother declined dramatically. While he wasn’t saying ‘No’ verbally he was frowning and shaking his head to communicate. Julie was getting good at ‘speaking for Jacob’. And, importantly, he was tolerating Charlie more and more but he was still protective of his precious Thomas the Tank Engine trains and he was ‘not really sharing at all’.

Julie laughed to tell me how she ‘tricked’ Jacob into sharing with Charlie. At night when the boys were in bed, she collected all the trains in a box and the next morning when Jacob went to play he couldn’t find them. So he took her hand and pulled her to where his trains were supposed to be and she said, “Hmm, where are those trains Jacob? Let’s go find them.” Charlie tagged along while the three of them went on train hunt. “Are they here? No. Are they here? No. Oh, here they are?” After lots of interaction they found the box. Then Julie said, “I had Charlie give the trains to Jacob one by one. Charlie was so happy to ‘play’ with his brother and Jacob was happy to have ‘found’ his trains. That was the good news. The bad news was, of course, that Jacob wanted all of Charlie’s trains too.

When Jacob was aggressive at all, he learned that it made his parents angry; they made him stop his activity; and they put him in time out.

When Jacob didn’t want to share or play, mom added a little guilt and jealousy by saying ‘Jacob, if you don’t want to play with Charlie then *I’ll* play with Charlie.’ And she would play in a way that tempted Jacob who was increasingly coming over to join them.

The Evolution of Sharing

All that was a year ago and things got better for a while. But over time, as Jacob made progress with his intensive intervention programming (See Visit 5, 6, 7, & 8) and as Charlie moved into the ‘terrible twos’, the brothers’ relationship deteriorated again. I spoke with Julie on the phone.

Mom: “The sharing thing is not going well. As soon as Charlie puts down a toy Jacob goes after it and vice versa. The boys are at each other’s throats.”

Me: “The problems with sharing are a good thing, Julie. It’s a sign they’re growing up.”

Mom (with an edge): “Walk a mile in my shoes Dr. Solomon, and you won’t think it’s such a good thing. They’re driving Jim and me crazy.”

Me: “I don’t mean to be insensitive; I know it’s not easy but the boys have been evolving and, hallelujah I think it’s time to actually have ‘rules for sharing. Remember when Jacob just ignored Charlie?”

Mom: “Except when Charlie cried!”

Me: “Then remember when they both didn’t care?”

Mom: “That didn’t last long.”

Me: “Then we had to protect Jacob from Charlie.”

Mom: “But now that doesn’t seem fair to Charlie at all.”

ASD & the Evolution of Sibling Rivalry

- Sib with ASD mostly ignores his/her siblings.
- Sib with ASD is aware but too young to be possessive. ‘Rules for sharing’ unnecessary.
- Possessiveness emerging but sib with ASD cannot understand ‘rules for sharing’.
- Younger typical sibling becoming intrusive. Child with autism needs ‘protection’.
– Older typical sibs should be taught about ASD.
- Sib with ASD can understand ‘rules for sharing’. Competition for toys creates conflict.

Me: “I agree. It’s time to have clear rules for sharing or the conflict will get worse because both boys are in a phase of development where conflict is common.”

Mom: “You can say that again.”

Me: “Both boys are in a phase of development where conflict is common.”

Note/Older Sibs: With older typical siblings there is a different but similar pattern of evolution. At first the child with autism is seen as not capable of sharing, so there is some tolerance. But if the child with ASD is allowed to take the older child’s toys (to avoid angry outbursts by the child with ASD) then resentment often starts and older typical

children become annoyed and annoying. They tease, get even behind parents' backs, can be provocative in many other ways. *Rules for sharing* (see below) are needed sooner rather than later. The children with ASD will get angry over not getting what they want but, over time, they 'get' the pattern of not being able to take the older child's things and they get over it. The older typical child then feels that justice has been done and becomes an ally instead of an instigator. There are of course the wonderful older siblings who tolerate the child with ASD no matter what he or she does but I see these little angels only rarely in my practice.

Jacob's Development. As Jacob turned 4 years old, he was consistently following 1 and 2 step commands; his expressive language was kicking in with dozens of single words and some two word phrases; and he was starting to truly understand consequences: if I hit Charlie, mom and dad will be mad; I'll have to stop what I like doing; and I'll have to go to time out. In other words Jacob was still significantly 'behind' in his language compared to his peers but he was making very good progress in his functioning. He understood, for instance, that he has *his* toys and Charlie has *his* toys and that Charlie doesn't like it when Jacob takes Charlie's toys. According to the 'philosophy of can', Jacob 'could' understand key ideas that would lead to truly 'sharing' with his younger brother who, at 2 ½, was becoming a 'pistol'.

Charlie's Development. Sweet little Charlie wasn't always so sweet anymore. He was not easily distracted anymore. He wanted to keep the toy he was playing with but Julie, with her belief that 'brothers should share', often made Charlie 'share' with Jacob to keep the peace. For a while, Charlie would reluctantly comply to please his mom but he wasn't happy about it. He knew it wasn't fair.

As he entered his 'terrible twos' phase, Charlie learned how to 'push his older brother's buttons' and make Jacob cry or hit (which Charlie knew would get Jacob into trouble). He was also figuring how to protect himself from Jacob's aggression by threatening back and/or running away behind his mom for protection.

Though Jacob was less violent, minor battles and squabbles between the brothers were becoming more and more frequent and the issues almost always had to do with *sharing*. The Grants wanted the boys to share and, over time, they let the boys 'do their own thing' which was leading to more and more sibling conflict and outright aggression. This was not working.

Sibling Rivalry Office Visit #2: Problems with Sharing

At our visit about the terrible, horrible, very bad, no good mornings (See *Chapter 19, Visit 12*), Julie Grant had mentioned the escalating problems with sharing and the increasingly difficult time she was having going out in public with Jacob and Charlie. We scheduled a visit. Even Jim Grant came in, a sign that things had gotten serious.

Right from the start, I could see that both boys had made a lot of progress developmentally, that they have become more socially sophisticated. Jacob said 'Hi' and slapped me five, as did Charlie. I did my 'Give me five. . .down low. . . on the inside. . . on the outside. . . up high. . . up in space. . . in your face (I put my hand over his face). Jacob got the game and loved it. Charlie wanted to do it too.

As mentioned Jacob has become a much different child. He is talking in single and some two word phrases; he's connected and 'with us', much more aware, and imitative. He's able to understand a

situation and problem solve to get what he wants. Charlie is easily at the same level if not a bit higher developmentally. They are twin-like.

Julie Grant starts off, believe it or not, with complaints about *Charlie*!

Mom: “Charlie is purposefully ignoring us; he refuses to do what we ask him to do like put his toys away and he calls me ‘poopy mommy’. Jim’s a disciplinarian and won’t put up with it. He has spanked Charlie for disobedience and disrespect. Personally I think the spankings only make Charlie worse. He holds a grudge and he has no fear.”

Me: “What about you? How are you doing with Charlie?”

Mom: “I feel sorry for him. He has to put up with Jacob’s control issues. Jacob is like a little tyrant. He shouts orders! And this sharing thing is driving Charlie nuts.”

Me: “This ‘sharing thing?’”

Dad: “Jacob is claiming all the toys.”

Me: “That’s not fair to Charlie.”

Dad: “But I’m not going to put up with Charlie’s screaming and bad behavior.”

Me: “But there’s a good reason for Charlie’s screaming.”

Mom: “The fighting is constant.”

Me: “So what are you two doing? Are you on the same page?”

Mom: “About sharing? Well yes and no. We both think the boys *should* share. Charlie seems to get the idea but Jacob doesn’t want to share at all. He thinks all the trains are his, even Charlie’s.”

Dad (digging at me): “We’ve been ‘protecting’ Jacob.”

Me: “Very funny, dad. You didn’t like my idea of ‘protecting’ Jacob when the boys were younger.”

Mom: “It worked. Jacob’s hitting went way down. But I think we created a monster.”

Me: “I agree. This has gone beyond ‘protecting’. We are now into *true sharing*.”

Mom: “Charlie’s no fool. He’s getting the short end of the stick most of the time and then when he gets upset and nasty he gets a spanking or a time out.”

Me: “That must make Charlie furious.”

(It’s interesting to note that when I am talking about something important to parents, even demanding, disruptive siblings seem to ‘get it’ and miraculously do not interrupt us. That’s the case here. Charlie and Jacob are playing very nicely together. And I think Charlie knows we’re talking about him.)

Mom: “I think Charlie is angry a lot and it’s showing up in other places. He’s not the sweet easy boy he used to be.”

Dad: “But Julie, you back off when Jacob yells and I think that makes it worse.”

Mom (to me): “If Jacob doesn’t get his way, he screams. I hate the screaming.”

Me: “Sounds like he’s getting spoiled and now Charlie’s screaming.”

Mom: “And hitting. It’s a mess.”

Dad: “I’m not home as much as she is Dr. Solomon but I don’t know how she stands it. It’s bad.”

Me: “So when dad’s home the sharing problems are better?”

Mom: “I don’t think the sharing problems are better but when Jim says knock it off, they listen. Me, they ignore and keep arguing.”

Me: “OK. Let me see if I can **summarize** what’s going on. Jacob hogs the toys and won’t share. He screams if you make him ‘share’. Then Charlie gets mad and yells or hits and then *he* gets a time out or a spanking for misbehavior. He’s becoming resentful and having more behavior problems.”

Dad: “That about sums it up.”

Mom: “Jacob’s gets some time outs too. But it’s not getting better; it’s getting worse.”

Forced Sharing.

Me: 'I get the picture. So what are your rules for sharing?'

Dad: "Rules for sharing? They should share."

Mom: "We don't have *rules*."

Me: "You can see what's happening and it's pretty universal. Most families in my practice have these sibling rivalry issues around 'sharing'. So mom, you have a sister, right?"

Mom: "And a brother."

Me: "So your sister or brother can come over to your house, grab your car keys and take your car whenever they want without asking, right?"

Mom: "Of course not."

Me: "Oh, I see. It's OK to make Jacob and Charlie 'share' but you won't share with your siblings."

Mom: "That's not sharing, that's taking. . I get it. When we make Charlie give a toy to Jacob he's not really sharing."

Me: "Right. You're forcing him to 'share' and forced sharing is not sharing. True sharing is when you *want* to share."

Mom: "But we were expected to share and we did."

Dad: "Same thing in my family. We wouldn't even think yelling or fighting over things. My dad was scary strict."

Me: "In a previous generation things were different but human nature hasn't changed and I'll bet you had your share of resentments when you were forced to share by your parents."

Mom: "Actually I'm still very possessive of my things."

Dad: "Yes you are dear."

Mom (giving him 'a look'): "I was the oldest. I remember having to hide my favorite things. My sister and I to this day are still very competitive with each other."

Me: 'From watching hundreds of families I can tell you that the three most common causes of anger, resentment, and family conflict are:

1. Not getting enough positive attention.

2. Unequal treatment/favoritism and

3. Forced sharing.

By far, forced sharing is the most common source of conflict because the competition over toys and possessions happens every day all day long."

Mom: "It's constant."

[Note: I have seen some families where forced sharing or just letting the children 'work it out among themselves' seems to work. Sometimes families can get away with it because of the particularly easy going temperaments of the children. But I worry that the seeds of resentment or excessive competition are being planted and will grow into bigger problems in the future (especially when the parents' back are turned!]

Dad: "When I was a kid, we knew what we could and couldn't do. Nobody had to say a thing. My dad was a military man."

Me: "Did you like it that way?"

Dad: "It didn't matter. That was the way it was."

Me: "You didn't have much of a choice. Is that how you want it to be for your boys?"

Dad (pausing): "Not really. We didn't have *any* say. There *was* resentment with my brother especially. So no, I want my kids to be close."

Me: "You're not close to your siblings."

Dad: "Not really. Not at all. . But I can't do what my dad did and what we're doing's not working."

Me: "So sounds like we have to find a middle ground. Not strict but not so loose that it's chaos."

Mom: "It's getting to be chaos."

Me: "So you ready to talk about the six rules for sharing?"

Mom: "Six rules?"

The Six Rules for Sharing

Me: "Here they are (I hand them each a list.) **Rule 1** we've already discussed.

Forced sharing is not sharing. *Rule 1 is that you don't have to share.*"

Rules for Sharing

1. You don't *have* to share. No *forced* sharing.
2. Favorite toys should be put away (otherwise they are public toys).
3. Public toys are shared on a 'first come' basis.
4. If both children want the same toys: Take turns. A 10 minute rule usually works.
5. If both children get to the toy at the same time: flip a coin.
6. It's nice to share because:
 - It makes the other person happy.
 - When you share with them they'll share with you.

Dad: "But don't we *want* them to share?"

Me: "Absolutely. That's coming up, bear with me. **Rule 2** states that if Jacob or Charlie have their own special toy or set of toys then *they should put their special toys away* (or you can put them away for them) when they're done playing or, **Rule 3** all toys (including those *not* put away) become '*public toys*' *first come, first serve*. If Jacob wants to play with the toy that Charlie's playing with then **Rule 4** is that you have to wait your turn. I like a 10 minute rule. (Almost no child will play with a toy for longer than 10 minutes.) So Rule 4 is that you have to take turns with a popular toy after a certain amount of time. That's not sharing; that's turn taking.

Mom: "What about when Jacob puts a toy down. It's like Charlie is just waiting. He runs and grabs it and Jacob chases him."

Me: "Rule 4 say that it's your toy for 10 minutes and no one can touch it even if you put it down unless you are really done with it."

Dad: "How will we know if he's really done with it?"

Me: "*You ask, you talk, you discuss. You work out boundaries, you make the rules clear*".

Dad: "Sounds like a lot of work."

Me: "Actually it is work in the beginning. You have to spend time teaching these rules. But it's good work. You give

positive attention. You acknowledge feelings. You create a level playing field without unfairness or favoritism and you reduce resentment. These are universal rules for sharing, right? These are the rules we all follow."

Mom: "Sometimes you don't know how it started. A lot of the hassles happen when we're not looking."

Me: "That's true. Sometimes you can't get all the facts. Oh look here, it's happening as we speak."

After being angels for almost half an hour, Jacob and Charlie, as if on cue, start squabbling over a car. Of course, it's about Lightning McQueen who has two little tires over the front windshield that look like black-rimmed glasses. Jacob loves that car. It's pretty clear what's happening. Jacob has had the car for a while and Charlie wanted it and so he took it first chance he had. The argument is really escalating and Jacob is lying on top of Charlie, loudly yelling 'my Lightning' (he can't pronounce the 'n' in Lightning) over and over, trying to get the toy car out of Charlie's hand while Charlie (who is kind of enjoying keeping the toy away) has extended his arm out of Jacob's reach.

Me: "You gotta love the timing. OK. Let's deal with this. Dad, what would usually do? Be honest."

Dad: "I know what I'd do because I do it all the time. Simple, I just take the toy they're fighting over away. I use to let them fight it out but now they can hurt each other. If I have to I pick them up and separate them. That pretty much ends it."

Me: "Until the next time. OK. Mom, what would you do?"

Mom (hesitating): "I hate the fighting and the crying. I'd. . ."

Dad (interrupting): . . . "She almost always asks Charlie to give the toy back to Jacob. (Imitating mom in a high voice)

‘Charlie that’s not nice. Give that car back to Jacob. Be nice to your brother.’ And then she’s buy Charlie off with another toy that he likes.”

Mom (laughing): “That’s actually a good imitation of me. I use to be able to distract the Charlie but these days that’s not working. Charlie usually starts it. (Looking stressed.) We need to do something. They’re going to hurt each other.”

And indeed they are. The yelling is getting louder and Jacob’s pulling at Charlie’s clothes and pinches Charlie hard. Charlie cries and starts kicking at Jacob.

I jump up and get control of the situation.

Me: “Woah! Woah! OK guys, guys. That’s it. That’s it.”

I pull Jacob up and off of Charlie. Charlie clutches the car to his chest as if he’s won the battle. Jacob, now in my arms, is still reaching for the car and chanting ‘My, my, my, my!’

Me (to mom and dad): “I always start with ‘feeling reflections’ or ‘mirroring feelings’. (Then I turn to the boys) *Jacob* you want that Lightning with the glasses. And *Charlie* you want Lightning too. *Jacob* that’s *your* car. You had the car and Charlie took it.”

Jacob stops chanting and looks at me as if to say ‘You got that right. That’s my car. Charlie took it. No Charlie.’

Jacob (echoing me): “No Charlie.”

Me: “And Charlie, you want Lightning. Jacob played with it a long time and now it’s Charlie’s turn.”

Charlie: “Charlie’s turn.”

Charlie acts like he’s won the argument and starts to play with the car.

Me (I hold him back from playing): “Whoa Charlie. You can’t play yet. If you play I’ll have to take that car from you. We have to work this out. Did you take that car from Jacob without asking? (Charlie lowers his head and has a guilty look.) I see. Jacob had the car a long time and you wanted a turn. (Charlie looks hopeful.) Hmmm. What are we going to do guys? Jacob, can Charlie play with that car?”

Jacob: “*My Lightning*.”

Me: “Jacob you had that car a long time.”

Jacob: “*My Lightning*.”

Me: “Charlie, Jacob does not want to share. You have to give the car back to Jacob and then you can have the car in 5 minutes.”

Charlie: “No, no, no. My car. (He clutches it tight with both hands.)”

Me: “Charlie, give me the car and you can have it in 5 *minutes*. Here is another car. Looks it’s Mader. He’s cool.”

Charlie (hitting Mader out of my hand): “No.”

Mom: “Charlie that is not nice to do to Dr. Solomon.”

Me (holding my hand out): “You can’t take Jacob’s car without asking. You have to ask. And Jacob does not want to share. If you don’t give me the car I will have to take it.”

Charlie, giving me the car—he understood the whole conversation!—starts to cry pathetically.

Me: “I know, Charlie, you really want that car and you *will* get it, promise, but you have to wait 5 minutes. (Charlie seemed to understand). (To Jacob) And Jacob you get to play with Lightning for 5 minutes then you *have* to give it to Charlie. You understand? 5 minutes. You’ve had that car a long time. You could share with Charlie, he likes that car too.”

Dad: “So you are forcing them to share.”

Me: “This is not sharing. This is taking turns, Rule 4. If Jacob would have given it to Charlie willingly, *that* would have been sharing.”

Dad: “I get it. There’s like an invisible boundary.”

Me: “Right, a psychological boundary that says *‘You can’t take something from someone without asking.’* But we allow our children to do it all the time in the name of ‘sharing’.”

Mom: “That’s so true.”

Dad: “But what if you can’t tell who took what?”

Me: “You try to find out what the truth is so you can be fair. With my kids when they were a little older than the boys—when the squabbling reached a certain decibel level or it’d gone on too long—I used to ‘hold court’. I’d get a towel and put it over my shoulders like a judge’s gown and I’d get a hammer like a gavel. I’d sit them down, pound the table with my hammer and say ‘Court is in session. Present your case.’ Then my kids would tell their stories. I’d listen carefully, reflecting everything they’d say like ‘I see. You were watching TV and your brother wanted to watch another show and you wouldn’t let him so he teased you. . .’ and I’d make it take a long time and very boring. And then invariably I’d determine that they both did something wrong—my son teased and my daughter hit him for teasing—and I’d give them time outs, 4 minutes for teasing, 5 minutes for hitting. They’d both be mad. They had to stop what they were doing; they had to listen to a boring court session; and they got short annoying time outs. It didn’t take long. I’d hear them saying to each other, ‘Stop, you’re too loud. Dad will hold court.’”

So, that’s a long way of saying that you should try to find out what happened in order to be fair but if you can’t then what I do if they were fighting over a toy, for instance, is put the object in question in

time out—take it away for 5 minutes—and then flip a coin to see who gets it after that (Rule 5) and then take turns (Rule 4).

Mom: “This all makes so much sense. Why didn’t we do this earlier?”

Me: “The boys weren’t developmentally ready. It’s been about 5 minutes so lets do Rule 4—Turn taking. (To Jacob). OK Jacob, 5 minutes are up. It’s time for Charlie to have the Glasses Lightning (Charlie’s little face brightens).

Of course Jacob clutches the car to his chest with both hands and scowls.

Dad: “I gotta see this.”

Me: (To dad) “I’m going to use my transition tricks here dad. (To Jacob) Jacob you still want to play with the car. (Jacob brightens.) But look at Charlie. He wants to play. It’s his turn. Come on Jacob, give it to Charlie. (No deal, Jacob hold on tightly.) OK. Jacob. You can have it for one more minute then you give it to Charlie or I take it away. (To Charlie) One more minute Charlie, then you can have it.”

Dad: “You’re giving in to Jacob.”

Me: “Right, for one minute. But I accomplished a lot. We ‘tussled’ over something important with lots of circles of interaction. I tuned Jacob in to Charlie’s feelings. I talked about time, rules, and consequences. And now the time is up and we’ll see if Jacob will give the car to Charlie willingly.”

Mom: “That would be a first.”

Me: (To Jacob) “OK Jacob time is up. Give the Glasses Lightning to Charlie. (Jacob ignores.) Jacob, look at me. (He looks) If you don’t give the car to Charlie, I’m going to take it and if you hit you are going to time out. I’m going to count to three Jacob. Give the car to Charlie. You have had it a long time. (Charlie has his hand out) 1-2-3.”

I start to get up from my chair and Jacob throws the car down angrily toward Charlie who grabs it greedily.

Mom: “Jacob don’t throw.”

Me: “Ignore that ugly behavior mom. He’s taking turns.”

Mom: “That’s amazing.”

Me: “Not really. Jacob knew I meant business.”

Dad: “And if he didn’t give it to you then you would take it away.”

Me: “Absolutely. And if he got aggressive, I would stop him physically and put him in a time out or hold him if necessary until he calmed down.”

Dad: “I can live with this. These rules are fair.”

Me: “These are the universal rules of sharing. They’re complicated but they’re real. This is what I want for all the children, a real understanding including the final rule.”

Mom (reading the list): “It’s nice to share.”

Me: “Right. (To Jacob). Hey Jacob, look at Charlie. He’s happy that you let him have Lightning. (To Jim and Julie). I’m going to point out Charlie’s feelings.”

Dad: “Jacob looked but he doesn’t care.”

Me: “Not yet. It takes many exposures but eventually he will understand that his taking turns and his sharing makes Charlie happy. This is Greenspan’s functional developmental level VI.”

Mom: “I feel much better.”

Dad: “This puts us on the same page. (To his wife) I really didn’t like it dear when you gave in to Jacob.”

Mom: “It wasn’t fair but I can see that I’m going to have to put up with some of Jacob’s yelling. But he’ll get it.”

Me: “And when he does, it will be a permanent understanding. The brothers will get along a lot better. The way you were going you were sowing the seeds of resentment in Charlie and that was coming back to haunt you.”

Dad: “Thanks so much Dr. Rick.”

Me: “I see from your list that Jacob is still working on toilet training.”

Mom: “Any tricks for that?”

Summary

- As Charlie, Jacob’s younger brother, gets older, he is becoming quickly aware that Jacob is getting more than his fair share of the toys and he’s getting resentful—and even—by pushing Jacob’s buttons and making sharing a big issue in the Grant household.
- Sibling rivalry is a complex developmental process that must take the whole family system into consideration.
- I summarize for the Grants the universal 6 rules for sharing and demonstrate how to implement the rules when Jacob and Charlie have a knock down, drag out fight right in my office.

Resources & References

- *Siblings Without Rivalry*, Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (2012)

Coming Up Next:

- Jacob is facing a big transition—full day school and leaving the PLAY Project intervention program. He’s made so much progress but Jim and Julie Grant are still worried about Jacob’s future.