

# Elder Law Newsletter: Can't We All Just Get Along for Mom?

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I am the second child in a family of three kids. My entire life I have heard the story of the day I was born. My mom always told me that I was born on a beautiful sunny day in March. The birds were singing, the tulips were blooming, and it was unseasonably warm in Chicago. When telling me this story, my mom would also remind me that both of my siblings were born in Chicago blizzards in the heart of winter. I'm not sure if the weather in any way foreshadows the type of person you will be, but my mom would tell you that I came into this world calmly and have always had a sunny disposition.

From the moment I was born, my older brother was not happy with me joining the family. He was the first son and grandson on both sides. You can imagine that for the three years before I was born, he was the center of the universe and didn't like having any attention taken away from him. My younger sister came three years after me, and it seemed like she and I had a natural alliance. He picked on us, and we bonded together as a team against him.

Sibling dynamics are complicated and interesting at every stage of life. And, even though we are adults that doesn't mean that those sibling issues just go away. In fact, as a geriatric social worker, I often see long-buried feelings come back to the surface, particularly when parents are aging, facing illness, and – yes – even dying. It is intriguing to see that individuals, who act as mature rational adults in every other aspect of their lives, when faced with a parental crisis turn right back into their 10-year-old selves saying things like, "You were always mom's favorite!" This sort of behavior can show itself in many different ways and at varying degrees depending on the functioning of the family while the children were growing up. The reality is, however, if your parents live long enough to become elderly, it is likely that they will need some sort of help navigating the later years of their lives. So what are some things siblings should consider when facing the challenges of caring for aging parents?

## **6 Tips for Working Through Adult Sibling Dynamics**

1. **Don't assume you and your siblings are the same people you were as children.** It is very easy to go back into the comfortable roles you have always played. Assess each sibling's strengths and create a plan that utilizes those. Don't just say things like, "She's the baby, what would she know?"
2. **Understand that not everyone has the immediate desire to help without first being asked.** Some siblings just do it, and this attitude often creates the martyr syndrome where one sibling does all the work while the others just assume the one who jumped in wanted to do it. Don't fall into this trap. If you need help, ask for it.
3. **Don't wait until your parents are dying to have the conversation about the type of care they want.** The worst time to discuss this is in crisis. Everyone should be notified who is appointed as Power of Attorney. Know whether you must act all together or if each sibling has the power to act alone when more than one sibling is listed.
4. **There is usually one main caregiver in all families.** Make sure that you give that caregiver the support and encouragement he or she deserves. This may be offering to come from out of town for a weekend and give the primary caregiver a rest or even send a gift card for a massage or coffee. Simple gestures can really make a difference.
5. **Draft a sibling agreement. Sibling agreements are not meant to replace a trust or a Power of Attorney.** Instead, the agreement can complement these valuable estate planning tools by providing guidance for the trustee or the holder of the Power of Attorney. The following are some examples of topics an agreement might cover:
  - o Which sibling has primary care of a parent and how caregiving duties will be divided among siblings
  - o Whether a sibling will be reimbursed for caring for a parent
  - o Where the parent should live — with a child, in assisted living, in a nursing home
  - o How to decide whether a parent should move into a nursing home
  - o How the parent's money will be managed
  - o Whether the siblings will contribute financially to the parent's care
6. If you and your siblings are completely lost in what to do to help manage the issues your parents are facing, find a professional who can help mediate, educate, and advocate for your parents. Caring for elders can be like trying to communicate in a foreign language that you have never been taught. Seeking professional help may cost money, but it will be well spent if the individual can help you understand and access benefits and services that you didn't even know existed.

*If you have questions about care coordination or other areas of elder law planning, please contact me or a member of our Elder Law Team.*