



Au Pair Extraordinaire

For parents who care

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How to handle favouritism as a parent – September 2010

By Ilze van der Merwe-Alberts

Most parents know it is important to handle all their children the same, yet it is not always and at all times easy to do that. Children also compete for their parent's attention and love and sibling rivalry is often the result of this competition. Dads and Moms often sit with their hands in their hair and feel uncertain how to handle it when their kids say something like "you love my brother more than me". It makes a parent feel challenged and guilty and just not good enough as a parent.

One thing for parents to remember is that we do not always like everything our children are doing, but we always love them. It does not mean that because you are a parent, that you will just like your child all the time. That is humanly impossible, because everybody feels close and likes a person if that person supports what is important to you. If your child does everything you expect him to do, you like your child. If your child is disobedient, difficult and challenging, in that moment you won't particularly like your child. But you will always love your child. It boils down to the simple human behaviour rule: "Help me to get what I want and I like you. Challenge me in what I want and I dislike you."

Another aspect of favouritism is that parents feel closer and can relate more to the child that is more like the parent. In every family some of the children take more after the father and some of the children take more after the mother. That is genetics and nature. For every person there is nobody else you know as well as yourself and therefore the child that takes more after you will be the one you understand more. Now take a look at the following scenario:

Mom and her son, Matt get on very well. Matt is more in personality like Mom and Mom understands Matt more than she understands her daughter, Rose. Rose is more like Dad and she also displays some of Dad's personality traits that is challenging for Mom. Matt and Rose play together and it is peaceful in the home. But alas, the peace does not last long and fighting erupts between the two children. Matt who is the older of the siblings does not like to be told by his younger sister what to do. He likes to be the boss. Rose on the other hand is strong-willed and does not suffer fools easily. The children make enough noise to ensure that Mom will come to sort the problem out. Mom walks into the room where the children are playing and sums up the situation in a split second and with knowledge about the children's previous squabbles. She perceives Matt to be frustrated by his sister's hard headedness and she understands how he feels, because that is exactly how she feels when her husband displays his hard headedness to her. Mom reprimands Rose for not giving Matt what he wants and Rose storms off shouting "you always takes Matt's side. You love him more than me!" Mom feels guilty and attacked by Rose and at that moment feels closer to Matt, who is supporting Mom with a hug and feels further away from Rose, who is challenging her.

How can parents handle a situation like this with less favouritism? The wise thing for parents to do is to look at the family realistically. The reality is that parents do not really favour one child above another all the time. It is situation based and temporary. There are equal times that parents favour every child; it all depends on the situation. It will be a wise step for Matt and Rose's mother to see



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herself as equally favouring Matt at times and Rose at other times. Everybody will favour another when the other person is supportive. So what can Matt and Rose's mother do? She can show Rose the times she took her side and Matt felt that Mom is on Rose's side. Mom must spend time with Matt and Rose and show them how she loves them equally and she likes them equally. Mom can say something like the following to Rose: "I know you feel I always take Matt's side and that I love him more. But let's look where I took your side and I loved you. Remember when the two of us went shopping and I bought you the beautiful clothes and we went to have a milk shake afterwards. Do you think that Matt felt I favoured you and I love you more than him when you told him what we did? I love both of you equally and I like both of you equally and nothing will ever change that." So is there really favouritism? If you honestly look at your behaviour with your children, you will see that there are times that one of your children is your favourite, because at that moment that child is just so much easier to be with. But at other times the other child is your favourite for exactly the same reason because at that moment that child is just so much easier to be with. Be careful not to get hooked in lopsided perception that you always favour one child above the other. You do it circumstantial and at times, not always. So help your children to change the way they look at it by changing your way of looking at favouritism.

All children just want to be loved for who they are as all parents just want to be loved for who they are. You favour your children and you don't. You are a great parent and you are doing the best you can with what you have at any moment. Your children are lucky to have you as their parent and you are fair at times in their perception and unfair at other times in their perception. Help them to change their perception and you then empower your children.

