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Playing Favorites

By Jeffrey Kluger

There's sweetness in the lies parents tell their kids, which is a very good thing, since they tell a lot of them. Yes, that indecipherable crayon scribble looks exactly like Grandma. No, I didn't put that tooth-fairy money under your pillow. The fibs — nearly all of them harmless — may differ depending on the family. But from clan to clan, culture to culture, there's one tall tale nearly all parents tell, and they tell it repeatedly: "We do not have a favorite child."

(Watch TIME's video "When Parents Play Favorites.")

Mom and Dad will say it earnestly, they'll repeat it endlessly, and in an overwhelming share of cases, they'll be lying through their teeth. It's one of the worst-kept secrets of family life that all parents have a preferred son or daughter, and the rules for acknowledging it are the same everywhere: The favored kids recognize their status and keep quiet about it — the better to preserve the good thing they've got going and to keep their siblings off their back. The unfavored kids howl about it like wounded cats. And on pain of death, the parents deny it all.

The stonewalling is understandable. Most parents want to spare unfavored kids the hurt that true candor could cause. Moreover, the court of public opinion can respond pitilessly — even furiously — to moms or dads who speak the forbidden truth. Last March, a mother of two wrote a candid post on the website Babble.com under the headline I THINK I LOVE MY SON JUST A LITTLE BIT MORE. The mom went on at length describing the greater warmth she feels for her baby boy compared with her toddler girl and even included a photo of herself and her unfavored daughter.

She was, predictably, blowtorched. "Please work on your issues lady!" said one typical response. "I feel absolutely horrible for your daughter!" read another. But then there was this: "I completely understand. I too feel this way."

The hard truth is, most parents do. In one oft cited study, Catherine Conger, a professor of human and community development at the University of California at Davis, assembled a group of 384 sibling pairs

and their parents and visited them three times over three years. She questioned them about their relationships and videotaped them as they worked through conflicts. Overall, she concluded that 65% of mothers and 70% of fathers exhibited a preference for one child, usually the older one. And those numbers are almost certainly lowballs, since parents try especially hard to mask their preferences when a researcher is watching.

If the scientists don't see through the ploy, however, kids usually do — and react accordingly. From the moment they're born, brothers and sisters constantly jostle for the precious resource of parental attention, each fighting to establish an identity that will best catch Mom's or Dad's eye. I'm the smart one! I'm the funny one!

Just who will win that love-me-best sweepstakes is hard to predict. The father-son bond is the stuff of legend — unless it's the father-daughter one that's the rule in your family. A mother innately understands her daughters — unless the girls turn out to be a mystery to her and she adores one of her boys best. It's equally hard to predict the fallout from favoritism. Being the favorite may boost self-esteem and confidence. But studies show it can also leave kids with a sense of arrogance and entitlement. Unfavored children may grow up wondering if they're somehow unworthy of the love the parents lavished on the golden child. But they may do better at forging relationships outside the family as a result of that. And there's no telling how the differential treatment will play out among the kids.

"My mom didn't like my older sister and did like me," says Roseann Henry, an editor and the married mother of two girls. "Everyone assumed I had it great, except that my sister tortured me pretty much all the time — and really, what affects daily life more for a kid, the approval of a parent or the day-to-day torment of an older sister?"

Nature's Rules

If the parental habit of assigning different values to different children can cause such pain, it's hard to understand why it ever became such a firmly established part of human nature. As with so much else in child-rearing behavior, it begins with the parents' survival needs: the biologically narcissistic act of replicating themselves through succeeding generations. This impels Mom and Dad to tilt in favor of their biggest, healthiest offspring, since those kids will be more reproductively successful and get more of the family's genes into the next generation.

That kind of reductionist, bottom-line behavior is something we share with creatures throughout the animal kingdom. A crested-penguin mother will kick the smaller of her two eggs out of the nest, the better to focus on the presumably heartier chick in the bigger shell. A black-eagle mother will watch idly while her bigger chick rips her smaller one to ribbons. "The function of the second chick is insurance," says Douglas Mock, a professor of zoology at the University of Oklahoma. "If the first chick is healthy, the policy is canceled." Humans may be a lot smarter than black eagles — and certainly more loving — but we're driven by the same evolutionary impulses, even if we're unaware of them.

The most conspicuous sign of fitness, of course, is physical appearance, and parents have a connoisseur's eye for what's appealing in a child. I was the second of four in an all-boy brood, and by almost any measure, the third in line, Garry, should have been the favorite, simply because he was gorgeous, born with extravagantly long eyelashes, absurdly perfect features and platinum blond hair that completed his found-in-a-cabbage-patch look.

There is not a parent on the planet who would admit to favoring a beautiful child over a less beautiful one, but scientists aren't constrained by the same pretense of impartiality. Long-standing bodies of work point to humans' deeply wired bias for the lovely over the less so — in the family, in the workplace and certainly in the dating market. It's part of what psychologist and sibling expert Catherine Salmon of the University of Redlands in California calls the "general heuristic that things that are attractive are healthy and good and smart."

For all this, however, Garry wasn't the favorite. For my father, it was Steve, the oldest, a selection made mostly on the basis of primogeniture. That's not uncommon. Firstborns are often the family's favorite, and the reason is one corporations understand well: the rule of sunk costs. The more effort you've made developing a product, the more committed you are to seeing it come to fruition. "There's a kind of resource capital parents pour into firstborns," says Ben Dattner, a business consultant and organizational psychologist at New York University. "They build up a sort of equity in them."

And that equity often pays off. The oldest in most families have historically been the tallest and strongest, thanks to the fact that at the beginning of their lives, they don't have to share food stores with other kids. One 2007 Norwegian study similarly showed that firstborns have a 3-point IQ advantage over later siblings, partly a result of being the exclusive focus of their parents' attention in the earliest part of life. These benefits accrue like compounding interest. A small IQ advantage, for example, may yield a similar edge in SAT scores, which may tip a firstborn off the Harvard waiting list and into the entering class.

For my mother, none of this firstborn promise mattered. In her case, the favorite was Bruce, the youngest. That, in a way, was my father's doing too. Having had his fill with babymaking, our father wasn't enthusiastic about having a fourth child so soon after the third and expressed that antipathy toward Bruce in a number of ways — not least with an unpardonably free hand with corporal punishment, once administered when Bruce's only crime was crying in his crib or toddler bed before falling asleep. My mother matched my father's negative bias with a fiercely protective positive one, and when Bruce later acquired the last-born's signature gifts — a bright wit, a natural charisma and a perceptiveness that made him instinctively empathetic — the love match was set. (Last-borns develop such a suite of skills defensively: the ability to disarm and charm — what sibling psychologists call a low-power strategy — is an essential survival skill in a playroom in which you're the smallest.)

Favoring the most vulnerable child is a counterintuitive choice, at least in survival terms. Playing by black-eagle rules, my father's hostility toward my baby brother ought to have doomed him in my mother's eyes too. A child who's already being ill treated by one parent has hurdles to overcome just getting out of

childhood in one piece, much less making it to a procreative adulthood. Best for a mom with years of child rearing ahead to cut her losses now.

Compassion — a feature not unique to humans but seen a lot more commonly in our species — was clearly at work here. But so were other practices we share with nonhuman species. In her book Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants and Natural Selection, anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy of the University of California at Davis cites work conducted with coots, a species of black-and-white waterbird common in Europe and the Americas. Unlike other birds, coots don't pour most of their parenting efforts into their strongest chicks but rather spread the care around in the hope of maximizing the raw number of offspring that survive. This can mean not just remembering to treat the weakest of your offspring equally but favoring them, since they're the ones that need the help.

In case a mother forgets which chick is the youngest (coots do all look remarkably alike), nature provides an unmistakable cue in the form of a bit of fancy red plumage on babies' heads. Baby birds don't have the colorful tuft for long, but for the period they do, they are irresistible, and mothers with a nest of babies will steer extra food to the reddest head in the bunch. It is surely a coincidence that Bruce, the baby in our nest, was a redhead, but that doesn't mean his coloration didn't work its charms on all of us. The chapter in Hrdy's book that deals with the coot is called "Why Be Adorable?" The behavior of human and animal families answers that question neatly.

Across the Genders

If physical appearance can be such an important driver of favoritism, gender, which goes beyond mere looks and into the very essence of the child, should be even more powerful. And it is. The oft seen pattern of parents with cross-gender preferences in their kids — the dad who's helpless in the face of his daughter's charms or the mom who adores her prince of an eldest son — is one good example. Such favoritism patterns hardly exist in every family, but they're more common than we think, as Salmon discovered in a 2003 study that was published in the journal Human Nature. "I asked subjects to list which child in the family was their mother and father's favorite," she says. "Overall, the most likely candidate for the mother's favorite was the firstborn son, and for the father, it was the last-born daughter. "

Studies that have dug deeper into this preference have found that it's not just the frilliness of a little girl that appeals to Dad or the uncomplicated love that can come from a boy that delights Mom. And while Freudians would raise the oedipal specter, modern studies have marginalized that factor. Instead, what parents seem to value most in their opposite-sex children are the traits that, paradoxically, are associated with their own sex — the sensitive mom with the poetic son, the businessman dad with the M.B.A. daughter. Reproductive narcissism, again, may play a role there. It's not always easy for a father to see himself replicated in a daughter or a mother to see herself in a son. But if the kids can't look like you, they can at least act like you. Sometimes, children may come by these traits innately; sometimes it can be tactical, a way to court a little extra love. In this sense, kids are like tree leaves, sorting themselves out so that they grow in a shaft of light not blocked by the leaf above.

"Siblings are devilishly clever," says author and family expert Frank Sulloway of the University of California, Berkeley, "much smarter than psychologists. They are constantly trying to fine-tune their niche to squeeze the maximum benefits out of their parents."

Gender may be especially powerful in determining favoritism in three-child families. As a rule, first- and last-born children have a better shot at being at least one parent's favorite than middle kids do. In all-boy or all-girl families this is especially so, since the middle child stands out neither by birth order nor by sex. That's the case too in families in which the gender sequence is, say, boy-boy-girl or boy-girl-girl, since the middle child is still not unique. Shifting the sequence, however — to boy-girl-boy or girl-boy-girl — may change everything. In these cases, the uniqueness of gender can trump everything else.

"If you have a child who is different for any reason, especially being the only girl or only boy," says Salmon, "that child is going to get extra attention and investment."

Whichever child is the favorite, once patterns are established, they're hard to break. Still, favoritism can fluctuate, depending on what are known as family domains. There's what happens inside the home and what happens outside it, what happens on the soccer field and what happens in the living room. The ex-jock father who favors his athletic son may be driven to distraction by the boy's restless energy when it comes time to have a conversation. When Dad is looking for quiet parent-child bonding, he may turn to his daughter. Over the course of a childhood, the son may still come out on top, but the daughter will get enough attention that the disparity may not wind up being significant.

"Favoritism patterns are pretty stable," says Corinna Jenkins Tucker, an associate professor of family studies at the University of New Hampshire. "But there are differences by domain. It's a problem when a child isn't favored in any area at all."

The Pain of the Second Best

For all this familial compensating, psychologists — to say nothing of parents themselves — rightly wonder what the long-term damage of favoritism may be. Can you go through your entire childhood looking enviously at the crowned prince or princess across the dinner table and not develop some psychic scars?

Not all experts agree on just what the impact of favoritism is, but as a rule, their advice to parents is simple: If you absolutely must have a favorite (and you must), keep it to yourself. Even if your kids see through the ruse, the mere act of trying to maintain it can help them preserve the emotional pretext too — a bit of denial that does little harm. What's more, the effort it takes to tell a benign lie is in its own way an act of love toward the unfavored child. "The very perception of unfavored treatment is bad," says Shawn Whiteman, an associate professor of family studies at Purdue University. "Perception is the key."

And a powerful one too. Psychologist Victoria Bedford of the University of Indianapolis has studied favoritism extensively, looking at the impact of what's known as LFS (least favored status) on children's self-esteem, socialization and relationships with other family members. No matter how she broke down her

data, it all told her the same thing. "My main conclusion was how horrible favoritism is on siblings," she says flatly, and sibs themselves often agree.

Charles Dickens wrote poignantly about his own LFS, which he experienced most acutely during a period in which his family had only enough money to send his older sister to school while he worked in a bootblacking factory. Even as a highly celebrated adult, he never fully got past the experience. "My whole nature was so penetrated by the grief and humiliation," he wrote later in life, "that even now, famous and caressed and happy, I ... wander desolate back to that time in my life."

Clare Stocker, a research professor in developmental psychology at the University of Denver, put some statistical meat on the bones of Dickens' experience. She studied 136 sibling pairs, then returned to observe them again two more times at two-year intervals. Over that period, she found that kids who felt less loved than other siblings were more likely to develop anxiety, low self-esteem and depression. Some of the subjects would react by exhibiting behavioral problems, leading parents to crack down on them, only widening the gap between the kind of treatment Mom and Dad were meting out to them and the kind being lavished on the favored child.

The damage that can be done to an unfavored child throughout the long slog of childhood is easy to understand. Harder to fathom are the ways a best-loved son or daughter can suffer, but they're real as well — and go deeper than merely the resentment a first-tier child like Roseann Henry felt from her sister. The biggest risk may be that when you spend your early life enjoying the huzzahs of your parents, you may be unprepared for a larger society in which you're just one young adult out of many, with the special charms Mom and Dad saw in you invisible to everyone else.

The story of the family prince struggling with adulthood is a theme in both drama and history. Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman is about more than the tragedy of its lead character, Willy Loman, as he loses both his livelihood and his dignity. It's also about the crisis of his sons — particularly Biff, the oldest — who grew up on a steady diet of paternal praise, only to find that others play by very different rules, expecting laurels to be earned before they're bestowed. When, as an adult, Biff at last learns the truth, he blames not himself, for his failure to achieve his dreams, but his father, for making him temperamentally ill equipped to do so.

"I never got anywhere because you blew me so full of hot air, I could never stand taking orders from anybody!" he shouts.

"The door of your life is wide open!" Willy protests.

"Pop!" Biff answers. "I'm a dime a dozen, and so are you!"

Not all favored kids come to the grief the fictitious Biff did, of course. For most, the humbling that comes from moving into a world in which people judge more objectively can be an essential step to success. But

whether favored kids learn the lesson well or not, it almost always awaits them. As family expert and author Judith Harris puts it, the first-among-equals status conferred in the home "doesn't travel well."

Favored sibs have other burdens to carry well before adulthood — among them a sense of guilt. It's hard not to feel pleasure at the preferential treatment that keeps coming at them from Mom and Dad, but it's hard not to feel sympathy for brothers and sisters who are denied it too. Lawrence Wynn, 20, a college student raised in Pacific Palisades, Calif., experienced such mixed feelings about his younger sister Emma, 17 (not their real names). Lawrence was their father's favorite, and he and Emma knew it. The disparate treatment got worse when their parents were divorcing and the stress of a fracturing family was expressed in their father's occasional outbursts of anger, often directed at Emma. Lawrence would come to her defense.

"I remember our dad would start yelling and my brother would try and steer his anger away from me," Emma says. "Then I felt guilty because [my father] would be screaming at my brother." It's a neat trick when a single parental act — openly preferring one child over another — can leave both kids with a guilt burden to carry.

But even the most blatant favoritism is easier to take when there's a defensible reason for it. Perhaps the most extreme example is when one child in the home has special needs. Children with Down syndrome or autism certainly require a particular kind of care and attention, including extra applause for skills learned. Kids with physical disabilities or challenges will require more time and attention from parents too, and that time and attention will necessarily be subtracted from the fixed amount they have to give their other kids. This is the human equivalent of the coot's instinct to protect the weakest — though amplified exponentially by our species' capacity for love. Still, even the most tolerant siblings will at some point begin to feel that, healthy or not, they deserve their full share of care. Talking about the situation openly is the best and most direct way to limit resentment. "Parents should give reasons the differential treatment is important," says Whiteman. "Research suggests that differential treatment may have no negative effects when children understand why."

Kids are also good at understanding that an older sibling will enjoy certain prerogatives that younger sibs don't get. What's more, the fact that the older sib does such trailblazing can mean looser rules for the younger ones. Parents may be beside themselves with worry the first time their firstborn gets behind the wheel. By the time the second or third kid is doing it, things are more relaxed. "What comes first is more salient," Whiteman says. "The age at which kids get privileges will look the same in terms of trajectory, but for second-borns, everything occurs earlier."

One of the best things about favoritism conflicts is that they usually fade as children grow older. Usually, of course, is not the same as always, and childhood resentments may never be entirely forgotten. Life issues such as which child becomes the caretaker of aged parents or who is bequeathed the most in a will can often become occasions to refight old wars and relitigate old grievances.

Still, in the best of circumstances, those battles can be fleeting. Even into middle age, my brothers and I — including Bruce — continue to try to coax our septuagenarian mother to concede that Bruce was her favorite son. Honoring the code of maternal omertà, she continues to deny it. Age, though, can make even the stoutest defenses slip, and one day she and I were recalling a long-ago school talent show that, like so many such shows when we were kids, starred Bruce. My mother beamed throughout the performance, and I glowered throughout it.

"Why were you so mad?" she asked. "Because he was my favorite?"

"Aha!" I cried.

"What?" she responded.

"You admitted it! He was your favorite!"

She looked at me innocently and blinked. "I have no idea what you're talking about," she said. It's her story — and she's sticking to it.

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