

Counting M&Ms: Unnecessarily Fair?

Are you adding and comparing columns of figures as you run from store to store, trying to make sure you've spent the same amount of money on gifts for each son or daughter? Does it bring back the days when you'd count out M&Ms and make sure each child's glass contained exactly the same amount of juice at snack time? Maybe you should chill out.

"Teens understand if a brother or sister is treated differently, as long as there's a good reason for it," said University of Illinois researcher Laurie Kramer in a recent study of adolescent siblings in 74 two-parent families. Amanda K. Kowal and Jennifer L. Krull of the University of Missouri at Columbia were co-investigators.

"In fact, kids expect and want their parents to be aware of their unique characteristics and different needs," said Kramer, a U of I professor of applied family studies. "It's reassuring for them to know their parents are paying that much attention."

Kramer told the story of a friend whose parents were so concerned about treating their five children alike that the siblings always received the same sweater for Christmas. "Now the kids may have thought that was fair--equal treatment and all that, but it didn't generate a lot of family warmth or a sense that their individuality was respected."

What Kramer thinks is important is that perceptions of unfair treatment don't go unaddressed. "People are more inclined to think differences in treatment are fair when they have an explanation for it. Unfortunately, the data shows that discussions about differential treatment don't happen very often. And when families don't talk about the reasons kids are sometimes treated differently, the children make assumptions and interpret their parent's behavior in ways that may not be correct."

The researcher asked teens in the study whether their parents generally treated them differently than their siblings in regard to different types of behavior: amount of time spent with parents,

demonstrations of affection, praise, frequency and severity of discipline, and so forth.

"Kids are more likely to say they're generally treated fairly rather than unfairly," Kramer said. "When we look at the responses to all of these questions, we can see patterns. And when there's a pattern of differential treatment, that may be a problem."

Such a pattern can lead children to conclude that one sibling is the favorite. And when that issue occurs, it can be very significant. "We all know stories about favoritism in families and the anger and resentment those situations caused," she said.

Kramer acknowledged that parents may feel closer to or more comfortable with a particular child because their personalities complement each other. Another sibling may require more attention because he has a learning disability. Kramer urges parents to be honest with themselves and figure out ways to connect with kids who may be feeling left out.

"If children feel like they can talk to their parents when they think they're being treated unfairly, often they can help sensitize parents to situations that may need to be changed," she said.

"But you can't make things come out exactly the same, whether it's dollars spent on Christmas presents or minutes spent helping with homework. It's important to tell kids, 'It's our intention to be as equal and fair as we can be, but we're not always able to do that, and it's not because we care more about one of you than the other,'" she said. "And this study shows the parent-child relationship isn't always in jeopardy when siblings are treated differently. It depends on whether kids believe that their parents are generally committed to treating everybody fairly."

