

# MOM

by ANNE BOKMA

## always liked **you** best

How favouritism affects families

**G**rowing up, Danielle Rothman\* was acutely aware that her mother preferred her youngest brother over the other three kids in the family. “She would actually come right out and tell him he was the favourite in front of us and we’d all cringe,” says Rothman, a 50-year-old communications professional and mother of two in Halifax. “She’d cuddle and hug him — something she rarely did with me. I grew up feeling inferior and unlovable.”

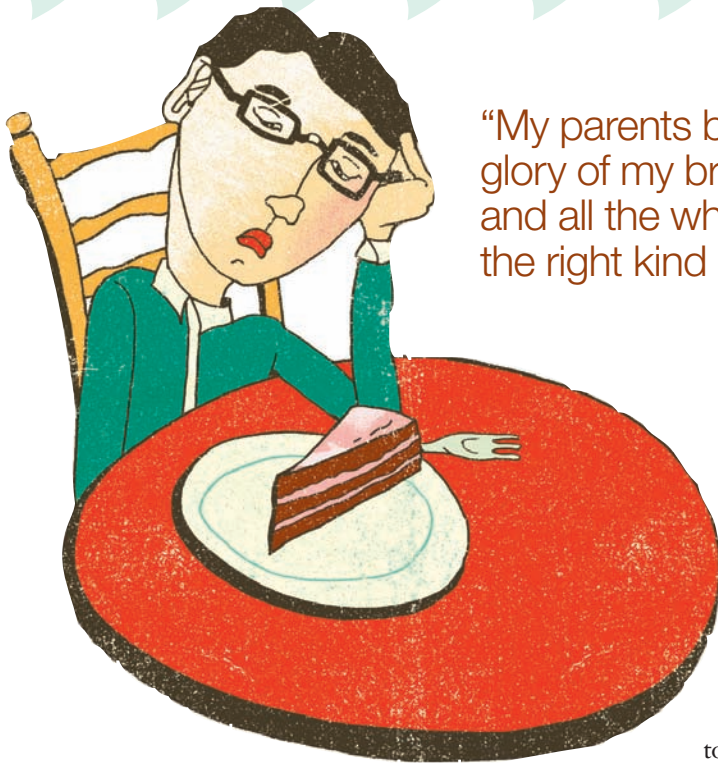
Rothman swore she’d never repeat her mother’s behaviour in her own parenting. And yet she reluctantly admits to feeling a closer kinship with the elder of her two daughters, aged nine and five. “Justine and I have similar personalities and she’s such an easy child to parent — she’s just great to be around.” Victoria, on the other hand, isn’t as easy to please and tends to be more rebellious. “Sometimes I worry because I have to work a little harder to appreciate Victoria. I have to put more effort into it and find ways that we can connect,” says Rothman. “I live with the constant reminder of what my mother did and I never want Victoria to feel that way.”

Rothman’s feelings aren’t unique. While few parents may actually admit to having a preference for one child, you don’t have to look far to find the mom who practically swoons over her son’s field goals or the

KIM ROSEN







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dad who treats his daughter like a princess. Parents may believe they are scrupulous about masking their preferential feelings, but kids can instinctively identify the golden sibling, says Katherine Conger, a professor of human development and family studies at the University of California, Davis, who has studied the issue of family favourites. Her research shows 65 percent of mothers and 70 percent of fathers prefer one child. This doesn’t mean they don’t love their children equally, but they do feel they relate better to one child in the family. Psychologists say there’s nothing wrong with feeling a special tug in your heart toward one of your offspring — the problem is acting on those feelings. That’s because more often than not, the second-tier child will pick up on the parental bias. “These kids can experience a decline in self-esteem,” says Conger. “They feel like they’re not as worthy and they’re trying to figure out why.”

Henry DaSilva,\* 68, recalls the decades-long resentment he felt toward his younger brother, a hockey star who won trophies and sports scholarships and the all-consuming devotion of his parents. Henry, on the other hand, was overweight and bookish. “My parents basked in the reflected glory of my brother’s achievements, and all the while I felt like I’d failed to be the right kind of boy for them.”

Practically any kid in the family can be the one singled out for special status — the first-born, the baby, the star performer, the child with special needs — but an easy-going temperament is the genetic trait that parents prize the most, says Vera Rabie-Azoory, a Toronto psychologist and author of *They Love You, They Love Me Not: The Truth About the Family Favorite and Sibling Rivalry*. “If parents really dig into their feelings, they’ll admit they

probably do like the child who is more warm and compliant,” notes Rabie-Azoory. She says disfavoured children will often act out as a way of seeking attention, thus perpetuating a damaging cycle of behaviour and reinforcing their disfavoured status. “Siblings compare themselves every moment of their lives and most of all they want to be unique in their parents’ eyes. They’ll find a way to do this even if it’s negative.”

Rabie-Azoory, whose children are now grown, admits she favoured her first-born daughter who was “likeable and sweet” as a youngster, while her second child was angry and oppositional. “I couldn’t figure out what was going on and I thought I was a bad parent. Then I started to look at the world through her eyes and I saw what she saw — my older daughter and I were like a team and my younger daughter was on the outside looking in.” From that moment on, Rabie-Azoory says, she made a concerted effort to give more attention and affection to her younger daughter. “I tell parents to do the same,” she says, “to fight hard against those feelings of favouritism.” She believes her daughters, now 28 and 30, have a good relationship today because she was able to learn to be more equitable in caring for them.

Rabie-Azoory believes sibling rivalry is the direct descendant of favouritism. Lois Washington,\* a 41-year-old actor and music teacher in Montreal, says the favouritism in her family caused so much dysfunction, it permanently damaged the relationships among her five adult siblings. She was born into a family of musicians and actors, and her parents encouraged their children to take to the stage, but feelings of intense competition emerged when they settled their favour on the youngest son, who eventually scored TV gigs and made it to Broadway. “My performances just weren’t valued the same way,” says Washington.

So does this mean favoured kids have all the advantages in the world, secure in the special status conferred by their parents’ abiding affection? On the contrary, Conger says they are often confused and guilty. “They know they are getting a better deal and they don’t really want to give that up, but they don’t know what to do about their sibling who is less favoured.” Rabie-Azoory theorizes that

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kids who are the apple of their parent’s eye may not have the same drive to succeed later in life. “Favoured personalities are usually too laid-back to push themselves and to try very hard to get to the forefront,” she says. “Disfavoured personalities are much more competitive and will overcome all kinds of obstacles in order to gain the limelight in any aspect of life.”

Wendy Postma\* can identify. Being the favourite of two daughters always made her feel uneasy, mostly because she was never sure why she had won the top spot in her family. The result, she says, is a lingering habit of not trying her best in case she fails and makes a fool of herself. “It was so obvious that my mom was nicer to me than to my sister, who she labelled the ‘difficult one.’ But being the favourite turned me into a praise junkie: My sister always did things she wanted to do, whereas I was always doing things to please other people,” says Postma, a mother of two who works at a Toronto ad agency.

Should you be worried if your kids accuse you of favouritism? Not at all. Children are notorious for pointing out circumstances in which they feel their sibling got a better bargain, however minute (“Hey, she got a bigger piece of cake than me!”). This isn’t necessarily a signal that you’re showing preferential treatment. The truth is, you can’t treat all your children exactly the same, nor should you be expected to. But if deep down you suspect you do have a special fondness for one of your children, the first step to avoiding long-term problems is being aware of your true feelings and taking precautionary steps. Conger offers the following advice:

**Do a reality check.** Not sure if you have hidden feelings of favouritism? Ask your partner — or a trusted friend or family member — to share their observations about how you treat your kids.

**Don’t compare.** Nothing sets the stage for unhealthy competition between siblings more than parents who size them up against each other.

**Force yourself to be impartial.** You may feel favouritism, but work hard against showing it. Butt out of their fights and don’t take sides.

**Love your children for who they are.** Try to ignore some of the flaws you perceive in your less-favoured child, and look for the positives. Seeing their strengths will help you appreciate them more. ❤️

*\*Names changed by request.*



## Cinderella syndrome?

Should you feel guilty about favouring your biological child over your stepchild? It’s one of those things that can’t be helped, says Melady Preece, a clinical psychologist who teaches at the University of British Columbia and has studied the dynamics of stepfamilies. “It’s perfectly natural and unavoidable.” She offers the following advice to step-parents:

**Be as equitable as possible.** Feeling closer to a biological child doesn’t justify the kind of preferential treatment that had Cinderella sweeping ashes while her stepsisters coiffed for the ball. House rules need to be applied equally.

**Recognize the relationship is different.** It’s OK to acknowledge that step-parent/stepchild relationships are not generally as emotionally close as biological relationships. “It doesn’t mean there can’t be a close bond with a stepchild, just that it’s a different kind of bond. You have to build your relationship differently, and it make take more effort to maintain a good relationship.”

**Don’t try to recreate the nuclear family.** “Everyone in the stepfamily has experienced some kind of loss, and problems occur when we try to make things the way they were before. That’s simply not possible — stepfamilies have to start from scratch to build their relationships.”

Did favouritism affect your family growing up? Share your comments on this article. [Todaysparent.com/favouritism](http://Todaysparent.com/favouritism)

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