



C1 Parental Favouritism

Guided reading



EXERCISE 1 DISCUSS THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS BELOW.

1. Have you got any siblings? What is your position in the family?
2. How often do you visit your parents?
3. Do your parents prepare anything special for your arrival (e.g. food, clothes, party, etc.)?

EXERCISE 2 READ THE INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS BELOW.

My siblings and I always knew when our middle brother was coming to visit my parents: my mother would put out little bowls of prawn cocktail, as a special starter. "Prodigal son," we would protest, slightly miffed that the rest of us never had this kind of privileged treatment. The official explanation was that he didn't come over for Sunday lunch as often as the rest of us.

In truth, despite the prawn cocktail, I did not think my parents had any favourites. I grew up as one of six siblings in a working-class family in north London. Of course, my brothers, sister and I all had different roles in the family. As the youngest, for example, I was always the one to go fetch things for my parents, maybe because they thought I had lots of energy anyway. My sister was usually the one to go shopping, because she could drive. I wondered how people in other families experience these dynamics, and how they might shape us in the long run even if we're not fully aware of them.

Adapted from BBC

1. What is the meaning of 'Prodigal son'?
2. Do you agree that all family members have certain roles? What do they depend on?
3. What was your role as a child? Do you have any roles now?
4. Do you think that parents pick their favourite children? Why (not)?

EXERCISE 3 READ ABOUT FAVOURITISM AND FIND THE ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS BELOW.

Research suggests that parental favouritism is surprisingly common – and rather than being a quirk of family life, can be very harmful. It occurs in around 65% of families, and has been identified and studied across many different cultures. As widespread as it is, it can damage children's well-being across their lifespan. It is considered such an important factor in a range of emotional problems that psychologists have a name for it: "parental differential treatment" (PDT).



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However, siblings in the same family may disagree over whether their family is even affected by it. That's because feeling less favoured can be subjective, says Laurie Kramer, a professor of applied psychology at Northeastern University. "It is the experience people have that a parent prefers another child to them," she says. "This could be by devoting more time, attention, praise, or affection. Possibly asserting less control, so that they may enjoy fewer restrictions, be subject to less discipline or even punishment."

For the person who feels like they are treated as second-best, the consequences can be profound. Research suggests that from an early age, children are aware of differential treatment, such as parents showing more warmth to one sibling than another. Such perceived parental favouritism has been associated with low self-esteem in children, as well as childhood anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems.

The mental health impact may persist into adulthood, with maternal favouritism for example being associated with higher depression scores in adult children. The bias itself may also continue in later life, with parents still playing favourites with their adult children. And while the parents rather than the siblings bear the responsibility for this, favouritism can harm the sibling bond over the life course and increase tensions and conflict between siblings.

Adapted from BBC

1. What is the percentage of families affected by favouritism?
2. What does 'PDT' stand for?
3. Do all children experience favouritism the same?
4. What are some short- and long-term consequences of differential treatment?

EXERCISE 4 READ THE TEXT AGAIN AND MATCH THE UNDERLINED WORDS TO THEIR DEFINITIONS.

1. _____: the length of time that an organism exists.
2. _____: deep or significant.
3. _____: a prejudice or inclination towards or against a particular person or idea.
4. _____: unusual or peculiar behaviour.
5. _____: personal opinions or experiences influenced by an individual's emotions or biases.
6. _____: a connection.



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EXERCISE 5 DISCUSS THE QUESTIONS BELOW, THEN READ THE TEXT BELOW AND CHECK YOUR ANSWERS.

1. How can parents avoid favouritism?
2. Can parents stop picking a favourite child?
3. Why do parents pick a favourite child?

Kramer's research on adolescents and their parents has shown that families don't tend to talk about favouritism. "If these situations were addressed in a sensitive manner, you can have more open conversations on all sides to understand. Parents could, for example, ask why the child feels they prefer a sibling. If a parent listens [and] provides a reason for the differential behaviours, that can work wonders." The child may realise that there is a practical reason and that it's not about the sibling being loved more.

Megan Gilligan, an associate professor of human development and family science at the University of Missouri, worked on the Within-Family Differences Study in the US. The project has tracked different families for two decades to better understand the relationships between the generations.

As part of the study, the researchers asked mothers and fathers a direct question about favouritism – for many, it was the first time they were asked about it at all. The question was: "To which of your children do you feel the most emotional closeness?" After a slight deliberation, a high proportion of mothers (75%) named one of their children. The rest chose none or said they felt equally close to all of them. They were also asked who they felt more disappointed with. The answer had consequences across the lifespan, with the child picked early on as "disappointing" and then also treated that way later on.

Birth order played a role in some aspects of favouritism, but perhaps not as much as is often assumed. Specifically, my guess that the first-born would naturally be picked as the "golden child" is not backed up by scientific research. For emotional closeness, last-born children are more likely to be chosen than the middle or first child, Gilligan says. But the strongest predictor for emotional closeness were the parent's feelings of the child being similar to them.

Adapted from BBC

EXERCISE 6 READ THE LAST PART OF THE ARTICLE AGAIN AND CHOOSE THE BEST ANSWER (A, B, C, OR D) TO THE QUESTIONS BELOW.

Question 1: According to Kramer's research, how can families address favouritism?

- a) ignore the issue and hope it goes away
- b) talk openly about favouritism without sensitivity
- c) engage in open conversations and provide reasons for differential behaviours
- d) punish the child who feels less favoured



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Question 2: What percentage of mothers couldn't name one of their children as their favourite?

- a) 25%
- b) 50%
- c) 75%
- d) 100%

Question 3: What is a significant consequence of a child being labelled as 'disappointing' by their parents?

- a) *the child becomes more competitive*
- b) *the child becomes more emotionally distant*
- c) *the child may be treated as disappointing throughout their life*
- d) *the child becomes the favourite*

Question 4: What does the text suggest about the role of birth order in favouritism?

- a) *first-born children are always considered the 'golden child'*
- b) *last-born children are never chosen for emotional closeness*
- c) *middle children are always the most emotionally close to their parents*
- d) *birth order plays a role, but emotional closeness is influenced by other factors*

Question 5: What factor had the strongest influence on parents' emotional closeness to their children?

- a) *birth order of the children*
- b) *the child's academic achievements*
- c) *the parent's perception of the child's similarity to them*
- d) *the child's gender*

EXERCISE 7 IN GROUPS, DISCUSS THE FOLLOWING TOPICS. SWITCH THE PARTNERS AND DISCUSS THE QUESTION BELOW.

Group A: Think of the reasons why parents may favour (or not) their first-born "golden child".

Group B: Think of the reasons why parents may favour (or not) their last-born child.

Exchange ideas and decide whether it is more common for parents to choose the oldest or the youngest child as their favourite. Give examples from your experience to support your argument.

Teacher's notes

Exercise 1. Lead-in

6 mins

As a group, discuss the answers to the following questions about siblings and students' positions in their families. Think about the frequency with which the students visit their parents and whether their parents prepare anything special before their arrival. Speculate why parents do these things before their children's arrival and why they prepare this specific thing for them and their siblings.

Exercise 2. Reading introduction + discussion

6 mins

Give some time to read the introduction to the topic of parental favouritism. Put students into pairs and allow them to discuss the answers to the questions. Students predict the meaning of 'prodigal son' and talk about the roles in their families and how they have changed over time.

Prodigal son - a man or boy who has left his family in order to do something that the family disapprove of and has now returned home feeling sorry for what he has done.

Exercise 3. Reading for gist 1

6 mins

Say that the next part of the article deals with the research about parental favouritism. Students read the text individually and then find the answers to the questions in the text. Before checking the answers as a group, allow them to compare the answers with each other.

Answers:

1. 65% of families are affected by parental favouritism.
2. PDT stands for parental differential treatment.
3. No, the feeling is subjective, and some children may not disagree over whether their family is affected by it.
4. Short-term consequences: low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, behavioural problems. Long-term consequences: depression, and bad sibling relationship.

Exercise 4. Teach - vocabulary

4 mins

Match the underlined words to their definitions and explain any other new words as needed.

Answers:

1. lifespan
2. profound
3. bias
4. quirk
5. subjective
6. bond

Exercise 5. Reading for gist 2

7 mins

Before reading the last part of the article, put students into pairs and ask them to discuss the answers to the following three questions about parental favouritism. Read the ending of the article and check the answers to the questions.

Answers:

1. Parental favouritism can be avoided by having an open conversation about the feeling of being less favoured and explaining the reasons behind it.
2. Students' own answers.
3. Parents choose a favourite child because of practical reasons, the child may be more similar to them, or birth order.

Teacher's notes

Exercise 6. Reading for detail

5 mins

Students work once again and read the last part of the article to find the answers to five multiple-choice questions. Compare the answers in pairs and then discuss them as a group.

Answers:

1. C (*"If these situations were addressed in a sensitive manner, you can have more open conversations on all sides to understand. Parents could, for example, ask why the child feels they prefer a sibling. If a parent listens [and] provides a reason for the differential behaviours, that can work wonders."*)
2. A (*After a slight deliberation, a high proportion of mothers (75%) named one of their children. The rest chose none or said they felt equally close to all of them.*)
3. C (*They were also asked who they felt more disappointed with. The answer had consequences across the lifespan, with the child picked early on as "disappointing" and then also treated that way later on.*)
4. D (*Birth order played a role in some aspects of favouritism; the first-born would naturally be picked as the "golden child" is not backed up by scientific research. For emotional closeness, last-born children are more likely to be chosen than the middle or first child...*)
5. C (*...the strongest predictor for emotional closeness were the parent's feelings of the child being similar to them.*)

Exercise 7. Group discussion

8 mins

Divide students into groups. Group A creates a list of reasons explaining why the parents may favour (or not) their first-born 'golden child', and Group B creates a similar list about last-born children.

Once the lists are created, put a student from Group A with a student from Group B, and ask them to exchange their ideas with each other. Finish the task by asking them to pick what is more commonly seen - a favourite oldest or youngest child. Monitor the activity and provide any help as needed.

Error correction

3 mins

Provide speaking feedback.