

# Dealing with Sibling Rivalry as Caregivers

From <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/dealing-sibling-rivalry-caregivers-april-hill/?published=t>

Published on February 7, 2018

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For most of us, sibling rivalry cools down during adulthood. Unfortunately, the stress of caring for aging parents can reopen old wounds and provoke new battles. Kiplinger shares strategies on dealing with your siblings while you all care for your elderly loved ones.

## **1. Advanced Planning Is Imperative**

There is no excuse for procrastination when it comes to care planning. No one wants to think of themselves (or their parents) as frail or vulnerable, but this is precisely why you must act beforehand. Meet with an attorney and a financial planner to discuss your options. Get everything in writing, and make sure every family member who will be involved is completely aware of and actively participates in the planning process. The maxim "get everything in writing" extends to any adult children who become caregivers: a "care contract" can outline the expectations and duties of the the caregiving child, and also specify compensation from the estate or family.

## **2. Don't Avoid Difficult Discussions**

"We don't need to worry about care plans just yet!" "Let's not discuss that right now." "Oh, your dad and I are fine. We'll talk about medical directives later." Now *is* "later" and you need to have this discussion with your family. Difficult topics like healthcare directives, care plans, and estate issues are rarely fun for anyone. Meet together and listen to your parents' wishes. It is better to force your little brother to hear your mother's opinions on DNR orders now than to scream at each other in a hospital hallway later.

## **3. Divide Responsibilities**

Democracy is not a good system when it comes to siblings caring for their parents. While your mother would rather you "all just talk it out," rule by committee can lead to problems ranging from hurt feelings to dangerous miscommunications. One sibling could be the primary caretaker and medical Power of Attorney, while another could be the financial Power of Attorney. Even if your parents favor one of their children and task him/her with every responsibility, you should all come together to ease the burden.

#### 4. Go with Your Strengths

Hopefully your parents swore that all of their children were equally smart/talented/beautiful/special, but everyone knows that each person has his/her own strengths and skills. You should assign roles according to best fit. If Nathan is a CPA, Martha is an attorney, and Jacob is an RN, then Nathan should handle financial matters, Martha could handle all legal issues, and Jacob will be best equipped to provide daily care.

#### 5. Seek Professional Help

Even close-knit clans can rip themselves apart when dealing with a parent's care. Stress, anxiety, and childhood scars can wear on anyone. If you and your siblings cannot work together, Kiplinger recommends hiring a professional elder care mediator. Mediators do not advise you regarding any issues; their function is to bring all parties together to discuss the situation (the mediator might not say that your oldest sister needs to help care for your father more often, but would offer suggestions on a care schedule). Finally, a therapist--either individually or as a family--could help resolve old issues and help you find a way to move forward.

Family can be difficult. Being forced into parental roles (taking care of your own parents) is stressful enough without resurrecting past grievances. Kiplinger emphasizes that planning and communication is key to successfully dealing with sibling as you care for your aging loved ones.

## Solving Sibling Squabbles Over a Parent's Care

From <https://www.kiplinger.com/article/retirement/T013-C000-S004-solving-sibling-squabbles-over-a-parents-care.html>

If advance planning didn't do the trick, hiring a professional mediator can help settle a family feud.

By BETH BROPHY, Contributing Writer  
From *Kiplinger's Retirement Report*, August 2015

Linda Olson of Littleton, Colo., says that her "nightmare" began in 2009, when her widowed mother was diagnosed with dementia. Her mother relinquished her role overseeing the family trust, and Olson and her two sisters became co-trustees. Their mother, now 80, lives with Olson, but each sister has an equal vote in decisions related to her care.

Their first major disagreement erupted over selling their mother's house to raise money to pay for her care, which Olson and one sister favored. But the third sister, who lived in the mother's house with her husband, vehemently opposed the plan, Olson says. A legal battle ended in the sister's eviction.

They also disagreed over taking their mom out-of-state to visit relatives. Olson and one sister thought the trip would be too hard on their mother, who had developed Alzheimer's. The other

sister took her anyway. The trip was difficult, and their mother, when she returned home, did not remember seeing her relatives.

Eventually, the sisters hired a mediation firm. The sisters meet with two mediators for a few hours each month. "We've spent about \$6,000 so far and it's absolutely worth it," Olson says. "We should have brought in a mediator earlier and avoided some battles."

This scenario -- middle-aged siblings squabbling over the care of their parents -- is playing out in thousands of households. Siblings often fight over these questions: Who will do the caregiving? Where should Mom live? Who handles the parent's finances? Should Dad's life be prolonged no matter what?

As if these issues aren't fraught enough, add to the mix long-simmering sibling grievances. "There are very few non-dysfunctional families," says Frederick Tansill, an estate-planning lawyer in McLean, Va. "Disputes that play over an elderly parent's health care often go back to childhood, over who was Mom's favorite or who was never really attentive to Dad."

The best way to prevent many of these conflicts is for parents to plan ahead and talk frankly with their adult children, according to lawyers and family mediators. One of the first steps to encourage future harmony is to gather the family for a conference where Mom and Dad can express their wishes for their care.

Marsha Swiss, an estate-planning lawyer in Washington, D.C., says parents and children should not avoid difficult topics. "People are reluctant to admit the obvious, that we are all going to die someday," she says. The parents should discuss their housing preferences if they can no longer stay at home. They also should make clear the measures the kids should or should not take to extend life, Swiss says. Parents should also discuss end-of-life issues with their doctor, she says.

Parents should draw up documents that will signify which adult child or third party will be the health care agent and who will hold the financial power of attorney. "The parent should vest authority in only one person," and also choose a successor for that person, says William Fralin, an elder law attorney in Arlington, Va.

Olson agrees. "In a perfect world, my parents would have selected one daughter to have medical power of attorney and one to have financial power of attorney," she says. "Then the three of us wouldn't have to negotiate every situation."

One common area of dispute is over caregiving. The child who agrees to be the primary caregiver may resent that her siblings don't recognize her efforts and second guess her decisions. One way to head off such disputes is for the parents to give the caregiver child the power to make health care decisions.

Parents also could give the caregiver child money from the estate later or enter into a "care contract" with the adult child. A contract could include responsibilities of the caregiver child and monthly compensation or monetary gifts to her. "If a sibling moves across the country, sells

a house and gives up a job to move in with Mom or Dad, it's appropriate to have a care contract, spelling out compensation," Tansill says.

Siblings should be aware of the terms, and the parent and child should have separate lawyers. "It is hard for siblings to object to an arm's length contract negotiated by different lawyers," Tansill says.

Sometimes, as with Olson and her sisters, families need to hire professionals to break the bickering cycle. One option is family counseling. Jonathan Caspi, a professor of family and child studies at Montclair State University in New Jersey, says siblings need to "focus on the here and now, and what is best for the parent."

For example, Caspi says, "a sibling may be making decisions based on guilt about promising that he would never place Mom in a skilled-nursing facility. But Mom can't be adequately cared for at home anymore." A therapist can direct the discussion to the parent's needs.

### Use a Mediator to End Disputes

Another option is an elder care mediator. Mediators don't give advice, and their goal is to "get everyone to the table and address the issues as a group," says Debbie Reinberg of ELDEResolutions in Denver.

Perhaps one sibling thinks Dad should stay at home, where he has privacy and familiar surroundings. Another wants him to move to an assisted-living facility.

A mediator could help the family figure out how to make the house safer and provide affordable help, says Arline Kardasis of Elder Decisions, a mediation firm in Norwood, Mass. The discussion becomes "not a tug of war over where Dad lives, but how we can meet as many needs as possible."

Sometimes a sibling feels left out of the loop. You could set up a private family Web site to keep each other informed, Kardasis says. Or you can use Lotsa Helping Hands (<http://lotsahelpinghands.com>), where an online calendar enables family and friends to coordinate support. Each sibling can sign up for a task.

Siblings should choose caregiving tasks based on their strengths. A techie sibling could set up a family Web page, while the lawyer sibling could become the financial power of attorney.

Olson says that "division by expertise has worked well." She handles her mother's finances and day-to-day care. Another sister looks after legal documents pertaining to the mother's farm land in Illinois.

Even professionals face challenges in their own families. Reinberg, 58, is the oldest of four sisters. Her father, 83, recently moved from close to Reinberg's house to an assisted-living facility in Dallas, two miles from another sister. "The four of us frequently e-mail and have conference calls," she says. "The key is listening to each other." It's also showing gratitude. The sister who lives near Dad does the most caretaking, and her sisters barrage her with gifts, Reinberg says.