

Inside the Bossy Sibling's Shoes

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

A few months ago, I met with three siblings. I'll call them, from youngest to oldest, Abby, Benjamin, and Clarise. Their oldest, Dora refused to come in.

Here's what happened.

Abby called, requesting the appointment because the four of them were fighting about their mother's care. "Most of the time," she said, "we get along ok. We stay away from anything that would cause arguments, and besides, we really don't see each other very often."

This last year things changed. Mother could no longer live alone, so Dora had her move in, and she takes full responsibility for her. The others have offered help and suggestions: Dora hire an aide so she wouldn't be so tied down; they take turns being with Mother so Dora and her husband can get away; Mother living with one of them; plus lots more. Dora has refused all help but now is complaining about the stress as Mother slowly declines.

All four were invited to the session; all but Dora showed up.

Here's a general summary of what happened in that one very long session.

1. The three younger siblings complained about Dora. She is bossy, just like she was when they were children.
2. After each one had plenty of time to spew their anger and resentment, they talked about how they really wanted to help. They knew Dora was having a hard time. Even though she had insisted Mother come live with her, she was overwhelmed now. She did everything for mother, refusing to even get a part time aide.
3. Much more time went to 1 and 2 above. And, we talked back and forth from childhood to present time.

4. Much more time, again, went to 1 and 2 above. (You get the picture?)

5. This allowed them to feel heard and validated for their anger at Dora and their helplessness in dealing with what they thought would be helpful to Dora. Then I asked what Dora was like as a child -- besides being bossy. She never got along with Mother (no one got along with Father). In school, she was the smart one, the pretty one, the social one. Clarise, only 17 months younger, was always jealous of her, especially once they were in high school.

6. As they talked, it appeared Dora may have been putting on a front, trying to meet parents' expectations, to achieve everything they and teachers expected of her. Benjamin suggested she may have been feeling somewhat insecure, under her "I can do it all" facade. The others had not thought of that, but considered it a likely possibility. the façade may have masked what they now see as her being so disorganized and indecisive.

7. Only then did I ask them to try stepping inside Dora's shoes. What might be her reason for insisting on taking full charge of Mother and not letting them help? This led to a number of ideas that none of them had ever before considered: trying to get mother to finally see she is a loving daughter; even though she feels insecure and inadequate in so many ways, she feels she should take the responsibility as the oldest; her relationship with her children is strained, so this may be a way to make herself feel she is a good care provider. They had a number of other possibilities for what may be behind Dora's need to have full control.

8. I had them think about how they have offered suggestions. It was always about helping Dora, their idea of what would help her -- you need more time for yourself, you should bring in professional help. It hadn't occurred to them that these weren't the ways she wanted help, or that she might hear their suggestions as she isn't doing a good enough job. They realized they had not asked Dora what, if any help, she wanted. They just assumed she should want help.

9. I suggested they ask Dora if there was anything they could do that would be helpful. At first it seemed to them like that was just playing with words. But, then they realized that out of their concern for Dora, they were imposing their own ideas of how she might be feeling. This led to a series of questions they could present to her, such as, is there anything we can do that would be helpful to you.

10. They began to see that offering their help could be construed by her as she wasn't doing enough or wasn't doing it right. They had originally called her bossy, but began to see her as really unable to ask for what she wanted. By their asking if she needed help, Dora could still feel in control -- of her own needs.

11. The follow-up conference phone call a few weeks later with the three younger siblings was remarkable. They said almost upon leaving the session, their anger at Dora had shifted to a sympathy for what she has lived with and how that has shaped her behaviors. When they met with Dora, and asked if she would think about ways they might be of help to her, Dora "snipped" she would think about it. They assumed she would forget. But, the next day, she called and asked when they could all meet.

While the problem around dealing with Mother has been resolved, these siblings may never be best friends. However, they are beginning to see how each of them put on their own facade to meet expectations of them or to get along better with others. The tension is relaxed, I hear. Perhaps, in time, they may become even a bit closer.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has been a marriage and family therapist for over 40 years with an expertise in adult siblings. She is author of numerous [books on relationships](#) – for siblings, marriage, singles, and friendships. Since 1996, she has run [Unique Retreats for Women](#) and does weekend retreats for adult siblings. She has offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati, Ohio. She is also available for phone and skype consultations.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis
DrKarenGailLewis.com
drkgl@Drkarengaillewis.com
301-585-5814

