SIBLING RIVALRY
jealousy

is defined as the intolerance of rivalry or unfaithfulness. Most parents can define it as that initial scream coming out of the bedroom because Brooke is playing with the teddy bear that Bobby wants. In the world of parenthood, adults often believe that they have made mistakes in parenting when they observe jealousy among siblings. When writing her book, “Preventing Sibling Rivalry,” Sybil Hart, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at Texas Tech University, described the positive approach taken in her research in order to aid parents understanding and handling of jealousy.

Hart received a National Institutes of Mental Health grant when she came to Texas Tech. The grant allowed her to follow-up research on jealousy in 12-month olds with research on 6-month-old infants. “Our research has shown that signs of jealousy can appear as early as 6 months of age,” Hart said. Her research studies also indicate that a negative reaction by a young toddler to a new addition in the family is normal and healthy. “Jealousy is actually a way of expressing love,” Hart said. “This is normal and does not indicate that your child is insecure or improperly trained.”

How is jealousy tested? Hart pulled together her knowledge as a mother of three girls, her experience as a childcare specialist, and her professional education to develop a technique to test jealousy in infants. “This kind of research is helpful because you can do a lot of naturalistic research, but getting into the lab will get you ahead by leaps and bounds,” said Hart.

The lab study consists of a triad: the mother, her infant and a doll. Hart placed individual mothers in a room with their infants and the doll, and the mother then would talk lovingly to the doll, as if it was a real infant, while Hart and her research team videotaped her infant’s reaction. Hart used a doll instead of a real baby because real babies are too variable. One could be a happy baby, and one could be crying, adding too much inconsistency to the research. “We are trying to control all of our variables,” said Hart.

The key to decreasing jealousy is finding out where it comes from. Hart discovered through her experiments that the nature of the mother affects the infant’s reactions. Hart categorized the mothers in her study into three different categories: intrusive, withdrawn and sensitive. When researching intrusive mothers, Hart found a closed-off, backing away reaction in their infants. “Infants who have a cold or flat response during the experiment are the children who could be subject to a minor form of child neglect,” said Hart. When looking at withdrawn mothers, unusual reactions are again more likely to show up. Infants of sensitive mothers usually react with a negative response, which is the healthiest result.

“Children who direct jealous reaction to their mothers are usually the healthiest emotionally,” said Hart.

Hart also addresses the issue of age-spacing as it relates to jealousy between siblings. One myth Hart noted in her book is that having children far apart helps children get along better. Hart recommends having children closer together in age. “Children who are closer in age are encouraged to form friendships and closeness with each other,” Hart said. “This is harder to do with widely spaced siblings because their interests will vary.” Children of the same gender also tend to get along better because they can form friendships more easily through common interests. When having two children of opposite sex, sometimes an older girl with a younger brother will get along because they will be physically quite similar during early childhood.

When will Brooke and Bobby understand what jealousy is? Children also have a hard time with abstract concepts because their word associations are quite literal. A concept such as jealousy is hard for a child to understand, so age must be taken into account when parents try to give explanations, Hart says. Jealousy develops over a period of time just like any other characteristic in a human and so does its comprehension.

How do parents prevent Brooke and Bobby from fighting over that teddy bear? Hart says that what parents want to know most of all is how to prevent jealousy and whether it is ever too late to try. Hart suggests that during an infant’s first year, parents can help their infants learn how to get adults’ attention by using positive behaviors, or a “love vocabulary.” The “love vocabulary” includes smiles, watching, eye-contact and affection, to which parents can respond by “showing optimism, being generous with praise and encouragement and being stable in providing support.” Hart also addresses the issue of older children’s jealousy by distinguishing different fight patterns and different motivations. Struggles between children serve different purposes and are aroused by different feelings. Parents can address these issues by using appropriate resolution techniques. By presenting anecdotes throughout her book, Hart highlights typical as well as unusual stories to portray real-life situations. “Some of these jealousy stories are not typical,” Hart said. “This puts your personal situation into a broader context.”

Through her research, Hart has discovered that jealousy is a way that a very young infant can say, “I love you,” which should be somewhat of a comfort to parents. “I had enough to offer parents very early in the game just by finding that infant jealousy is normal and healthy,” said Hart. “That alone just changes everything you thought you knew about jealousy.”