

FAMILY TIME

As an only child, raised by a single mother, I often longed for a big family. I was sure that my friends with siblings were having a much richer childhood full of family bike rides and camping trips. Since I couldn't give myself siblings, I did the next best thing: I had my three kids in three years and four months (but who's counting?), forcing intense birth order issues upon them without their consent.

I had no idea what I was getting into. Nobody prepared me for the reality of "family time" -- often a front row seat for the feature presentation of *Sin Nature: Upclose and Personal*. (Anyone who believes people are basically good hasn't ridden in a car with three kids on the way home from church.) I didn't realize that during those "sweet" family bike rides, selfishness would still run rampant on our shared-DNA parade. Fights over who would lead our pack, complaints about ill-fitting helmets, and at least one kid not wanting to take a bike ride in the first place replaced the cheerful banter and laughter I had envisioned.

I find myself so discouraged at times by the ugliness that comes out in the family setting. I have to remind myself that it is not nearly as upsetting to my

children. Because they are close in age, they've never known a time without siblings. They bounce back quickly from their bickering, and I think it is because they aren't looking for their family to define them; it already does. When my daughter was in first grade, she was knocked over in the carpool waiting area by some energetic boys. Her teacher hurried over to make sure she was okay, only to have my daughter tell her without tears, "I have brothers. I'm used to pain." Even at six years old, she had a confidence that was rooted in being the baby sister.

My childhood longing for family activities masked a deeper longing for a shared identity and experience. As an adult, I'm learning that how perfect our family looks is not what makes those connections meaningful. Just this morning, I found my three kids together gleefully stomping on large sheets of bubble wrap so intensely that it sounded as if we were under enemy attack. Unplanned time together that happens just because we are sharing a home is true family time. It is our shared lives that make those bonds strong. I want to be someone who is relationally rich, but that means I have to embrace my relationships now and not wait until they are perfect to enjoy them.