

# Mom loved you best

It is often said that money makes people do funny things.

The old aphorism seems especially applicable in matters of inheritance. Mere greed, however, does not fully explain the complex emotional dynamic that fuels inheritance disputes.

Money certainly has something to do with it. Who doesn't want more money?

Money, money, money!

Just look at the faces of the winners displayed in casino advertisements; those people look really happy. But if you look deeper, inheritance fights



**Actress Tori Spelling lost a huge inheritance from the estate of her late father, TV-mogul Aaron Spelling.**

aren't about money; they're about what money represents: love.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have long understood that parental love, attention, and approval are the building blocks of self esteem. Parental love is essential for the development of a child's feelings of safety, worth, and acceptance. In a perfect world, children would receive all the love they needed to grow into perfect parents who would in turn continue the cycle of perfect love with their children.

Unfortunately, that isn't how it works; parents have their own problems: they die, they divorce, and they often must divide their love among many competing interests including their spouse, boss, clients, and other children.

Nowhere is the competition for parental love fiercer than in the nest. Siblings naturally compete for the love

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and attention of their parents. It is a competition that lasts a lifetime with each child seeking special recognition of their unique qualities.

In the words of Drs. William and Mada Hapworth in their book, *Mom Loved You Best: Sibling Rivalry Lasts a Lifetime*: "To survive psychologically, we must feel that we fit somewhere, that we are somebody, a person of substance to whom attention must be paid."

We learn to compete by knocking heads with our siblings. We hone our social skills with our siblings, forming our first alliances and suffering our first betrayals. Longer in duration than any of our relationships, the history we share with our siblings endures a lifetime. Siblings are part of our inner fiber that we can never permanently erase.

The rivalry continues long after the real or perceived competition for parental love ends. The importance of the relationship magnifies both the love and the hurt or anger we feel toward our siblings. Siblings know our secrets and our hot buttons. Sometimes a simple look or an imperceptible slight can send siblings into an emotional tailspin.

Even emotionally healthy parents cannot perfectly dispense equal love. Even if they did, siblings would nonetheless feel that someone received more. No matter how hard parents try to treat their children equally, there are often differences in children that require different treatment. These inequities, real or perceived, fester for a lifetime both between the parent and child and between siblings.

Healthy parents will recognize unhealthy competition and attempt to diffuse it before it turns into all out warfare. Sadly, unhealthy parents may play favorites or worse foster conflict among their children in order to keep themselves as the center of attention (narcis-

istic behavior).

The illness or death of a parent often breathes new life into old and perhaps dormant rivalries. Resentments over past inequities or transgressions are rekindled as siblings jockey to determine who will be in charge of aging parents or who will inherit prized possessions.

The rivalries of the sandbox are reincarnated in the dispute over who will be the leader or who will get dad's gold watch. These disputes are really not about who is in charge or who gets the watch, but who is bigger and more worthy. Worse, losing the battle for superiority leaves the loser feeling insignificant and unwanted. With the stakes so high it's not surprising that inheritance and other family disputes become life and death struggles with no winners.

Inheritance disputes are often sparked by the preemptive strike of a child with long-standing feelings of being cheated out of his or her fair share of love. Often, disfavored children re-enter their elderly parents' lives in order to even the score with their siblings. They either confuse their vulnerable parents with lies convincing them to disinherit their siblings, or trick them into adding themselves as joint owner of assets in order to "help them pay their bills" or "avoid probate."

They're not just after their parents' assets for themselves; they want to make sure their siblings don't get them. Consciously or unconsciously, they want their siblings to feel the pain they have suffered for decades. They feel no remorse for their outrageous and even criminal actions; in their mind they're only making things right. Sometimes they truly believe that their parents wanted them to get more because they did so much more for them, or they steal in the belief that their siblings would have "taken everything" had



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they not beaten them to it.

Elder abuse is often aided and abetted by sons and daughters-in-law who impose their own hurt and anomy onto their impressionable spouses.

Parceling out equal love is especially difficult in second marriages with the child-stepparent relationship taking on features eerily similar to that of siblings. The recent well-publicized battles between Dale Earnhart Jr. and his stepmother and Spelling and her mother are really struggles for validation.

The media and the public are fixated on who inherited the decedent's money and empire, but they miss the point. The combatants are really locked in a life or death struggle for self worth and importance. Money becomes the measure of the decedent's love because it's tangible and quantifiable and because we are more comfortable talking about money than about love. What Dale and Tori are really struggling about is who dad loved best.

In death as in life, parents must be vigilant to treat their children equally.

A parent's Last Will and Testament or trust will be perceived as their final statement of the relative worth of their children. Even the most incidental slight will result in emotional trauma that will likely be passed on to the next generation.

Our most important legacy is our family; arrange your affairs to give them the greatest chance to live in peace and harmony. Don't let your money make them do funny things.

Contact attorney Mark Accettura at (248) 848-9409.