Episode Book

EPISODE #6563

Why Siblings Experience Different Childhoods

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SYNOPSIS

Two siblings can grow up in the same troubled house and come away with entirely different childhoods. Sparked by a listener's conflict with his peacemaking brother, this episode examines the research on nonshared environments, differential parental treatment, and family triangulation. It unpacks why "golden child" and "scapegoat" labels are shakier than they seem, how a 30-study meta-analysis explains parental favoritism, and why understanding a parent's trauma doesn't erase accountability or require keeping a sibling close.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a sentence Tom in Leeds has been waiting his whole adult life to hear from his older brother. Something like: what Mum did to you was not okay. And there's the sentence he actually gets, every time. "We all went through it. Dad drank, the house was chaos, Mum's traumatised too, you have to make allowances."



Herman

And Tom's answer to that, which he put better than I'm about to: fine, I'm traumatised as well, and I went to therapy instead of taking it out on people.



Corn

That's the whole collision in one exchange. Tom sent us the long version: the brother who might be a good person but has become the force that keeps pulling him back into the family system, the resentment that's built up around that, and a therapist telling him it isn't fair to let his mother sour the relationship with his brother.



Herman

His question underneath all of it, though, is not really about his brother's character. It's about structure. Why do siblings who grew up in the same house end up in such different positions, the golden child, the scapegoat, the peacekeeper? Why does "she's traumatised too" feel persuasive and wrong at the same time? And can you keep a sibling at arm's length without that being one more thing she's taken from you?



Corn

He isn't asking whether his mother was bad. He's settled that. He's asking why his brother can't say it out loud, and whether the distance he's contemplating is a betrayal or just a different survival strategy.



Herman

And those are answerable questions, actually. There's real research on differential treatment, on triangulation, on estrangement. This one has a literature.



Corn

Then let's use it.



Corn

The puzzle that hooks me first: two children, same parents, same house, roughly the same decade, and they come out the other end with two different childhoods. Not different interpretations. Different events.



Herman

Different events, yes. Behavioral genetics has a name for this that I find elegant: the nonshared environment. The intuition everyone has is that siblings share a home, so they share the environment. The genetics people turned that over and found that most of the environmental variance between siblings isn't shared at all. One review of the twin work on eating disorders put somewhere between seventeen and forty-six percent of the variance down to nonshared environment, and the factors they listed were things like differential parental relationships and being teased about weight. Different treatment inside the same walls.



Corn

The house is one building and two climates.



Herman

That's a good compression of it, actually. And it matters for Tom's situation in a very specific way, because his brother's line, "we all went through it," might be factually true of the brother's experience. The brother went through a house with a drinking father and chaos. Tom went through a house with a drinking father, chaos, and a mother who treated him a particular way. Those are different houses, in the only sense that matters.



Corn

The roles, though. Golden child, scapegoat, peacekeeper. Tom uses that vocabulary, and honestly everyone does now. How much of it is load-bearing?



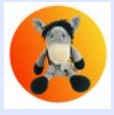
Herman

Less than the internet thinks. The five-role model, the one with enabler, hero, lost child, mascot, scapegoat, comes out of clinical work with families of alcohol-dependent parents, and a review by Pauline Vernig in Substance Use and Misuse looked hard at whether those roles can actually be measured and concluded the attempts were, quote, fraught with difficulties. The main instrument had forty-six items and most of its validity evidence lived in unpublished manuscripts and dissertations. Her bottom line was that the clinical usefulness might not outweigh the classification problems.



Corn

So it's a set of metaphors wearing a lab coat.



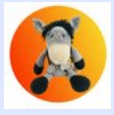
Herman

Mostly. There's one study from 2021, Zagefka and colleagues in The Family Journal, that did test it: family dysfunction predicted landing in the scapegoat or lost-child role, and those roles predicted more depressive symptoms in adulthood. So it's not nothing. But one decent study is not a taxonomy.



Corn

What I like about that is it mirrors Tom's actual problem. A good story about why something happened is not the same as a justification for it. The role vocabulary is a good story. The "she's traumatised too" argument is a good story. Both are shaky as explanations, and neither is an excuse.



Herman

Which is exactly where I wanted to go. Let's do the mechanism first, though, because the differential-treatment literature has something uncomfortable in it.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

The big recent meta-analysis, Jensen and Jorgensen-Wells in Psychological Bulletin, pooled about nineteen and a half thousand participants across thirty studies. And the finding relevant here isn't the headline one, which was about daughters being favored. It's that parents favor conscientious children, kids described as responsible and organized, and the authors' read is that these children are simply easier to manage. Conscientious kids also had fewer negative interactions, fewer conflicts with parents, and that effect was stronger than the positive-interaction effect.



Corn

The reward for being manageable is not being attacked.



Herman

Essentially. Yes. And note what the mechanism is not. It's not that the parent loves one child more. It's fit. The easy child costs the parent less, in a house that's already expensive to run.



Corn

That reframes the brother completely.



Herman

It does. If Tom's brother was the easier child, the more agreeable, the more conscientious one, then "we all went through it" is a true report from his sample. His family contained a mother who was less dangerous to him. Tom's contained one who was more dangerous. The brother isn't lying. He's generalizing from a sample of one, and the sample wasn't representative.



Corn

The problem is that "you have to make allowances" is a demand built on that unrepresentative sample.



Herman

And Tom's own counter, that he was traumatised too and went to therapy instead of taking it out on people, exposes the asymmetry from the other side. The child who absorbs less conflict has less to explain away. The brother's peace cost him less than Tom's resistance cost Tom, so the brother concludes peace was cheap.



Corn

There's a Boston clinical study you mentioned to me before we started, about the peacemaker role. Say that bit properly.



Herman

An older paper from the Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston identified several roles children take in troubled families, scapegoat, baby, pet, peacemaker, and the finding I keep coming back to is that the peacemaker role was maladaptive specifically when the child prematurely took on adult roles in parental quarrels. Not peacekeeping in general. Peacekeeping as a child doing a job that was never the child's.



Corn

A child who learned to manage a parent's emotions and never got told the job ended.



Herman

That's the brother, to my ear. He's not just loyal. He's running a childhood strategy that never got retired, because in that house it worked. And there's a second literature that describes how that actually functions day to day: triangulation. Conflict between two people gets managed through a third person instead of being addressed directly. The classic example is the parent who isn't speaking to one sibling, so she routes messages through another.



Corn

The brother as the postal service.



Herman

He's the channel through which the mother's position arrives. And there's a -analysis from last year, forty-nine studies, over twenty-three thousand participants, that found a moderate correlation between interparental conflict and children feeling caught in the middle, and feeling caught tracked with anxiety, depression, poorer self-esteem, weaker relationships with the parents.



Corn

Caught between two parents is the studied version. Tom's version is caught between a parent and himself.



Herman

Right. The literature mostly studies children triangulated between mothers and fathers, not adult sons triangulated between a mother and their own history. But the mechanism transfers: if you're the one expected to carry the message and smooth the friction, your relationships to everyone in the system get distorted by the job.



Corn

Which takes us to the therapist.



Herman

And I want to be careful here, because I'm a retired pediatrician and I have opinions about other clinicians talking past the family system.



Corn

You've earned one careful opinion.



Herman

The therapist's line is that it isn't fair to let the mother sour the relationship with the brother. And on its face, that's decent advice. Don't let one relationship destroy another. But Lucy Blake's research on estrangement complicates it. Blake, a sociologist who's



Herman (continued)

talked about this on the APA's psychology podcast, found that having an estranged parent is one of the common causes of sibling estrangement, and specifically that siblings get perceived as siding with that parent. If the brother is the transmission channel for the mother's framing, then the relationship with the brother is already mediated by her. It's not a clean thing that she's threatening to spoil. It was built partly out of her material from the start.



Corn

Telling Tom to protect it from her is like telling him to keep a river clean by guarding the downstream end.



Herman

I'd put it slightly less poetically and say the therapist is asking Tom to pretend the channel is neutral. Which it isn't. It's the same pipe.



Corn

Herman, can I ask you something as a clinician, not as a brother who read papers overnight?



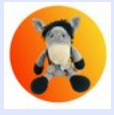
Herman

I'll attempt the separation.



Corn

Is the brother's position defensible at all?. Because Tom says he might be a good person, and I noticed Tom keeps that sentence in there even while resenting him.



Herman

I think it's defensible as a position and indefensible as an argument. As a position: the brother found a way to survive that house and it involved absorbing the mother, keeping close, managing her, and he's not wrong that it kept the family limping along. As an



Herman (continued)

argument: "she's traumatised too, so you must make allowances" takes a true premise and smuggles a demand through it. Whether the brother knows he's doing that, I can't tell from here, and neither can Tom, honestly. That's what the resentment is about, I suspect. The not knowing whether it's the strategy talking or the man.



Corn

The strategy talks in the man's voice. That's the whole problem with retired survival roles.



Herman

That's better than what I was going to say and I resent it.



Corn

Take it up with my childhood.



Herman

You slept through your childhood. I was there.



Corn

Two different houses, Herman. Same flat.



Corn

Let's do the argument itself now. "She's traumatised too." Why does it feel persuasive and wrong at the same time? Because I think Tom's phrasing there is exact, and I want to take it apart rather than just call it a bad argument.



Herman

It's persuasive because it's partially true, it's offered with compassion, and it reframes accountability as cruelty. If you push back, you're the one being harsh about a wounded woman. That's the trap's shape. And it's wrong because it treats trauma as a universal solvent. If her trauma dissolves her responsibility, then everyone's trauma dissolves everyone's responsibility, all the way down, and Tom's line is the reductio: he was traumatised too, and he went to therapy instead of taking it out on people.



Corn

Trauma explains a vector. It doesn't cancel the destination.



Herman

There's a formulation I like from a clinician named Stacey Uhrig, who works with trauma-informed approaches. Her version is blunt: understanding is not excusing, understanding is not permission, understanding does not remove accountability, and when someone is violent or controlling, safety comes first. Always. She doesn't hedge it into softness.



Corn

And the philosophical version?



Herman

To explain an action is to identify the conditions that made it more likely. To excuse it is to reduce or remove responsibility. Someone put it as "a history is not a verdict of innocence." I'd say that to Tom directly: everything the brother says about the mother's history can be true, and the allowance he demands can still be refused. Explanation is true or false. Excuse is granted or not granted. They're different transactions.



Corn

The brother has merged them, which is why every conversation goes in a circle. He thinks he's offering an explanation. He's actually requesting a payment.



Herman

And the mother, note, never made the same request available to Tom. The brother is asking Tom to extend an allowance the mother never extended to him. That asymmetry is the moral core of the whole thing, and it's why "make allowances" lands as an insult even when said gently.



Corn

Now, the role vocabulary. We flagged it's shaky science. Does it do any harm, or is it just a harmless map?



Herman

My honest view: it does real emotional work and it can overreach. "Scapegoat" names something that otherwise has no name. If you're the child the family's stress drains toward, having a word for it is the difference between "something is happening to me" and "I am the problem." That's worth a lot. Where it overreaches is when it becomes an identity with a mechanism attached, as if the family assigned roles at birth like a casting sheet. The actual mechanism we have evidence for is duller. Fit. Temperament. Which child was easier to manage in a house that had no spare capacity for managing anyone.



Corn

The dull explanation is sadder than the dramatic one.



Herman

It usually is. And here's the part I'd say to Tom: the dull explanation doesn't weaken his account, it strengthens it. "My brother was easier for her, so she went easier on him" doesn't require anyone to be a villain. It just requires an exhausted parent allocating scarce patience, which is one of the most ordinary tragedies there is.



Corn

And that gets us to the last question. Arm's length. And the fear underneath it, which I think is the real thing Tom's asking: if he pulls back from his brother, is that one more thing she's taken?



Herman

The estrangement literature is oddly comforting on exactly this point. Roughly one in four siblings go through a period of estrangement, and the longitudinal work suggests cut-offs tend to be temporary. Distance between adult siblings is not an anomaly or a failure state. It's one of the standard shapes the relationship takes.



Corn

One in four. That's not estrangement, that's just actuarial.



Herman

Right, and there's a subtler finding I find more moving. An Australian qualitative study on estranged family members found that many of them check on each other indirectly. They won't or can't make direct contact, but they still track the major events in each other's lives. Distance and attachment coexisting. Estrangement is not indifference. Sometimes it's just the largest amount of contact a person can afford.



Corn

You can watch someone from far enough away that they can't reach you.



Herman

That's bleaker than the finding, but yes, in the direction of the finding.



Corn

Sorry. Sloth pessimism. Continue.



Herman

The point for Tom is that arm's length is not a trophy she wins. It's not proof he got to him, or that the mother got between them. It's a distance, and distance is adjustable in both directions, which is what "temporary" means in that literature. The one-in-four figure cuts both ways: it's common, and it usually doesn't stay a full cut-off.



Corn

What would the brother actually have to do to give Tom what he's asking for? Because I want to be fair to the man. Tom is fair to him.



Herman

Not agree that the mother was a monster. Just acknowledge that Tom's experience was different from his own. That's the whole ask, and notice how small it is on paper and how impossible it turns out to be in practice.



Corn

Because saying it costs the brother something.



Herman

Because the brother has forty years of continuity invested in "we all went through it." If he grants that Tom's childhood was materially different, then his own account of his own life has to be rewritten, from inside, at cost, for someone else's benefit. Most people don't do that. Because they can't afford it.



Corn

We did an episode a while back about a listener whose parent always took the other side, the boss, the teacher, anyone but him. Same shape: the person positioned to validate your experience keeps validating the other party instead. Tom's story is that dynamic moved one generation over, into a sibling.



Herman

And it's the same injury both times, which is why it stings in a way a straightforward betrayal wouldn't. It's not that the brother disagrees with Tom. It's that the disagreement arrives from inside the family, wearing the family's face.



Corn

So what do we tell him? And I don't want a to-do list. I think he's past lists.



Herman

Then I'll say it as a fact rather than an instruction. His ask is reasonable. The brother's inability to meet it is a fact about the family system, not a verdict on Tom's worth. Those two sentences can sit next to each other. The reasonable ask and the unmet ask. He's allowed to stop auditioning.



Corn

Auditioning is a good word for it, because that's what the "one sentence" becomes after enough years. An audition he keeps failing to book.



Herman

And the mercy of the dull explanation is that nobody in the casting session is a monster. Just an exhausted system, still allocating.



Hilbert

Arm's length. That's the phrase I'd argue with.



Corn

It's a standard phrase, Hilbert.



Hilbert

It's the wrong distance. Arm's length is what you keep from a stranger with a clipboard. Nobody times a Sunday around a stranger.



Herman

You've lost me.



Hilbert

My brother and I don't speak properly. Three years now. When our mother died, he wanted the house kept exactly as she'd had it. I wanted the locks changed before the will was even read, and the probate office in Wakefield had a clerk named Mr. Sedgwick who took eleven weeks to confirm what a house was worth, so I had the time to think about it. My brother said, about the locks, she'd have hated that. I said she's dead. That was the whole conversation.



Corn

That was the last proper one?



Hilbert

More or less. I'd priced buying his half out. I still know the figure. I decided it was too much for a house I'd have to keep apologizing to, so I let him have it.



Herman

You drive past it, don't you.



Hilbert

Sundays. Front, then round the back lane, then past the side gate, timed so I don't get stopped at the lights on Woodhouse Lane where he'd see the car sitting there. That's not avoidance, that's scheduling.



Corn

He's avoiding the conversation about why he's there. The garden's the destination.



Hilbert

The garden's the report. If it's overgrown, something's wrong that I'd have to do something about. It hasn't been overgrown yet. He was always better with the garden than with anything else, our mother included. I'll say that for him.



Herman

That Sunday route is the thing, though. That's the checking-on from the Australian study, done with a full tank of petrol.



Hilbert

I don't know anything about an Australian study, Herman. I know the route takes forty minutes and I don't get out of the car. He keeps the house. I keep the timetable. It's not reconciliation, but it's also not nothing, and I've never once called it arm's length. You two used the phrase eleven times before lunch.



Corn

I stand by the figure but not the noun.



Herman

Sedgwick at the probate office. Eleven weeks. Did he ever explain the delay?



Hilbert

He explained it twice, in letters, both times differently. I kept both letters. That's the sort of thing you keep, and then it's thirty years later and you're the sort of man who kept them.



Corn

The Sunday route, Herman. That's the answer to Tom's last question before we even asked it well. Distance with a schedule in it isn't indifference. It's maintenance.



Herman

The estrangement people would call it low-contact with monitoring. I'd call it a brother, still assigned, doing his rounds.



Corn

Tom's question was whether arm's length is one more thing she's taken. I'd say the thing to watch isn't the distance, it's who sets the route. Hilbert's brother didn't design that Sunday drive. Hilbert did. The distance is her legacy maybe, but the shape of it is his own.



Herman

And the temporary part matters. One in four siblings, and most come back from it, sometimes years later, usually through exactly the kind of side door Hilbert keeps driving past. Tom's brother may never say the sentence. But the sentence isn't the only door into the room.



Corn

The duller truth, the one from the differential-treatment work, is the one I'd leave Tom with. Two children in one house don't have one childhood, because the house treats them differently. The brother's "we all went through it" is true of his. Tom's therapy is true of his. Both can be true at once, and neither one cancels the other's invoice.



Herman

And if the sentence ever does come, my guess is it arrives late, sideways, and half by accident, the way those things do, and it'll be worth less on the day than the years spent waiting for it.



Corn

Tom, if you're listening, thank you for sending this one. We took it seriously because it deserved it.



Herman

Thanks as always to Hilbert Flumingtop, who produces the show and evidently also conducts surveillance on his own behalf.



Corn

For more along these lines, there's episode forty ninety-five, When Parents Always Side Against You. This has been My Weird Prompts. If today's episode landed somewhere close to home, leave us a review, it helps other people find the show.



Herman

Reviews on Spotify, wherever you get us. We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you then.

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