What to say when your teenager says you have a favourite

"My fifteen-year-old told me I obviously have a favourite and it isn't her. I was hurt and argued back. What should I have said?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Oh, here we go. I don't have a favourite, and frankly that's a hurtful thing to say after everything I do."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"If it looks like I favour him, I want to know. What have you noticed? I'm listening, not arguing."

A teenager who says you have a favourite has usually been collecting evidence for a while. The instinct is to be hurt, then to argue the case. But a teenager can weigh reasons, and the research suggests that the reasons are exactly what matters.

What is known, and at what age

A study by Kowal and colleagues interviewed 135 children, around twelve on average, and separately their older siblings, around fifteen, about how their parents shared out affection and control. Getting more parental control than a sibling went with more behaviour problems. But when young people judged a difference to be fair, they showed fewer signs of worry and low mood, and higher self-esteem.

An earlier study by Kowal and Kramer found that children aged 11 to 13 judged most of the differences they noticed to be fair, often because of a sibling's age or needs, and that older children were more likely to see a younger sibling's extra help as justified. The children who saw the differences as fair reported warmer relationships with their sibling.

What the words do

Take 1 makes the conversation about your hurt, so she learns not to raise it again. Take 2 asks what she has noticed, and the last line tells her you will not argue. Hear the whole list without correcting it. Own what is fair to own, and change it. Then explain the differences that are about age or need, in a sentence or two. A difference she can understand is one she can live with.

If you live in two homes

A teenager in two homes may compare how each parent treats each sibling, and the comparison can be sharp. Keep to your own home: hear what she has noticed here, explain your reasons, and leave the other home's choices to the other parent. Never ask her to report on them.

In the UK

If the complaint comes with withdrawal, low mood or talk of not wanting to be at home, talk to your GP or your teenager's school. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. Kowal, A., Kramer, L., Krull, J. L., & Crick, N. R. (2002). Children's perceptions of the fairness of parental preferential treatment and their socioemotional well-being. Journal of Family Psychology, 16(3), 297–306.
2. Kowal, A., & Kramer, L. (1997). Children's understanding of parental differential treatment. Child Development, 68(1), 113–126.
3. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
4. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
5. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
6. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
7. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.