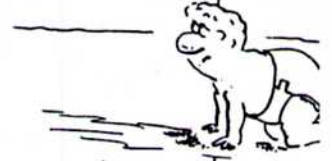


# A Tale of Three Ralphs

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Once upon a time there lived a husband and wife who decided that if they ever had children, they would do everything in their power to be the fairest parents in the entire world. "To make sure that we bring up all our children equally fairly," they vowed, "let's make one Golden Rule: EACH CHILD WILL BE TREATED EXACTLY ALIKE—WITH ABSOLUTELY NO EXCEPTIONS."

Soon the husband and wife had a little baby son. They named him Ralph, and they loved and cherished him very deeply. He grew and grew, and the little family was incredibly happy.

When Ralph was three years old, his parents had a second child. This time it was a baby girl. Remembering their rule to treat each of their children *exactly alike*—with absolutely *no exceptions*—they named her Ralph also. For a moment, they thought about calling her Ralph the Second.

"But that's not *exactly* what we called our first child," protested the husband.

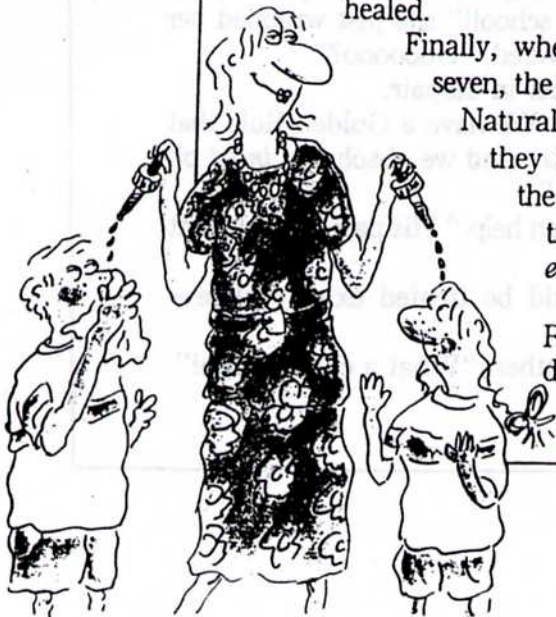
"You're right," agreed the wife. "It wouldn't be fair." So they decided to call the new baby just plain Ralph.

As time went on, no matter what happened, the parents kept their promise to treat each of their children exactly alike. And so, when their first Ralph developed a runny nose, they gave *both* children nose drops. And when their second Ralph fell down while roller-skating, both children went around with bandaged knees until the second Ralph's cut was completely healed.

Finally, when the first Ralph was ten, and the second Ralph was seven, the proud parents had a third child—a beautiful baby daughter.

Naturally enough, they named her Ralph, and soon afterward, they brought her home from the hospital. It was then that the husband and wife first began to notice that their decision to treat each of their children *exactly alike*—with absolutely *no exceptions*—was causing a few problems.

For one thing, since they wanted to keep newborn Ralph in diapers, they had to make the other Ralphs wear diapers as well. And, since newborn Ralph couldn't walk,





the parents were forced to make the other Ralphs lie around in cribs all day, just like their baby sister did. Well, the older Ralphs were not altogether pleased with this state of affairs, and they objected quite strenuously. "It's not fair," they yelled from their cribs. "It's just not fair."



The parents thought long and hard about their children's complaints. "How could it not be fair?" they wondered. "After all, we've brought up each of our children exactly alike—with absolutely no exceptions." Finally, the wife came up with a plan. "Maybe it would be better," she suggested, "if, instead of treating the older Ralphs the same as newborn Ralph, we did just the opposite."

"That's absolutely *brilliant*, sweetheart!" enthused the husband. "Let's start right away." And they did.

Over the next few weeks, despite both parents' very best efforts to make the new plan a success, matters really didn't improve much. For example, when they demanded that newborn Ralph set the table and clean up her room, she just burst into tears and did nothing. When the mother requested, "Ralph, please let the cat out," the infant just stuck her thumb in her mouth and dribbled. And when the father grasped the baby gently by her shoulder and said, "Ralph, it's time for school!" she just wrapped her tiny hand around one of his fingers and answered, "Goooooo?"

"What shall we do?" sobbed the poor father in despair.

"I don't know!" wailed the poor mother. "We have a Golden Rule that all our children are to be treated *exactly* alike. And we absolutely *insist* on being fair. I'm afraid there's just no solution."

Finally the oldest Ralph said, "Maybe we can help." His parents looked at him blankly.

"Maybe, just maybe, all us children could be treated exactly alike—*except for certain things*."

"Except for certain things?" mused their father. "What a curious idea!"



"It *does* sound interesting," added their mother. "But how would it work?"

"Well, suppose that you and Dad treated us exactly alike—*except* when it seemed silly to do so," answered their son.

"Sure," his sister chimed in. "Like when Mom and Dad made us both get braces because *your* front teeth were crooked, that was silly. But when they bought each of us identical Venus flytrap plants—and identical little bags of bugs and ants to feed them—well, *that* was fair."

Their mother looked at her husband and nodded. "I see what they mean," she said.

"And while we're at it," the second Ralph said, "it's silly for all of us to be called 'Ralph.' And confusing, too."

"But what can we possibly do about it *now*?" their father wanted to know.

"Well, you could *start* by giving us new names," the first Ralph suggested.

"Fair enough," said their father.

"Well, why *not*?" said their mother. She turned to the first Ralph. "Ralph, what would you like *your* name to be?"

"Well, I've always been rather partial to the name 'Ralph,'" he said.

"Okay . . ." said the mother uncertainly. "'Ralph' it is." She looked at the second Ralph. "And how about you?" she said. "If you could have any name in the world, what would you pick?"

"No doubt about it," her daughter replied without hesitation. "I'd like to be called 'Ralph.'"

"Uh-huh," said the father. He looked in the crib where his infant daughter lay chewing on the schoolbooks her parents had left there in the vain hope she would finally begin to catch up on her homework. "And I suppose you'd like us to keep calling *you* Ralph, too?"

The baby was too young to answer, of course, but the parents could tell from the glint in her eye that the name "Ralph" suited her just fine.

And so, from that time on, Ralph, Ralph, and their little sister Ralph faced a fair, but somewhat confusing, future in a family with a *new* Golden Rule for bringing up children equally fairly:

"SINCE NO RALPHS ARE  
JUST LIKE THEIR SISTERS  
AND BROTHERS,  
WHAT'S GOOD FOR ONE RALPH  
MIGHT BE BAD FOR  
THE OTHERS."

Or, in other words,  
"TO EACH RALPH BE TRUE."

