

A LINE ON LIFE

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"*That Isn't Fair!*" *

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Do your children, students, customers or employees think that your treatment of them is not fair? Do they think you are biased toward others, giving them special treatment? Does this match your view of the situation?

For almost ten years, social psychologist Gerald Leventhal investigated perceptions of **fairness** in various social situations. Leventhal found that our judgments of fairness are determined by three distinct and different rules.

The first rule is called **equity** or **distributive justice**. With equity, outcomes are fair if they match the contributions of each participant. Those who make greater contributions should receive proportionally greater rewards. Equity is typical of piecework or commission. The more a person makes (or sells), the greater the financial reward will be. Equity can also be applied to salaried work. This is why many women are upset doing the same job as men, but getting less pay. They are using the equity rule for fairness.

However, equity is not the only standard of fairness. Fairness in social exchanges is also judged by **relative need** — those most in need should get more of the resources. This applies to people with various handicaps or illnesses — or to communities when disasters occur.

Relative need is more typical in intimate relationships. The sick child gets more attention. In the same way, the emotionally upset, hysterically crying person is more likely to get help — and more of it — than someone who calmly asks for it. Similarly, in a doctor's office, regular patients may wait hours longer, because the physician is called away on an emergency. (The emergency involves a greater need.)

The third and final rule is **equality** — everybody gets the same rewards regardless of contributions or needs. The "*one person, one vote*" rule is an example of equality. The equality rule is often evoked when those involved want to maintain harmony and avoid conflict. (Would you buy one of your children an ice cream cone without treating the others equally?)

The relative importance of each of these rules varies with the situation and the type of relationship. When different rules of fairness are used in the *same* situation — this leads to **conflict**. Suppose, for example, you have one child who has repeated illnesses. You would tend to spend more time with that child (relative need). However, your other children may feel neglected, because you do not spend as much time with them (equality).

As much as we may want to do it, equal treatment of all children is an *impossibility*. Each child is a separate individual varying from brothers and sisters in terms of age, sex, temperament, interests and abilities. If children are aware that they get special rewards, they are less likely to resent others getting special treatment. If one child asks why another got a special treat, you can tell him why — but also remind him of specific, recent instances when he got rewards that the other did not get. (If you cannot remember doing anything special for that child recently, possibly his resentment may be justified.)

Another good example of conflict between different rules of fairness occurs in hospital emergency rooms. One patient comes in with a painful broken arm. Suffering with her pain, she sees other patients — who came in after her — receiving help before she does. She feels upset because it isn't "*first come, first served*" (equity or equality). However, the other patients may have had life-threatening disorders, so they are treated first (relative need).

What is "*fair*" depends on situational factors.

What is fair? Which rule should be used? The answers to these questions will vary, depending on the circumstances. However, the next time the situation seems unfair, instead of getting angry, try to understand which rules of fairness are being used — equity, relative need, or equality. (Does that sound fair?)
