MELISSA KEITH: I have four children and my third child is definitely my favorite. From the moment she was born, I kind of felt more of a connection with her than any of my other children. We're taught not to have favorites, but I have favorite friends, favorite family members and even a favorite root beer.

**Parents Playing Favorites / NPR**  October 11, 2011

COX: Now, that was Melissa Keith(ph) in Clawson, Michigan. Of course, not everybody agreed with her. Here is Anna Martinez-Crippa from Santa Barbara, CA, who also posted on NPR's Facebook page.

ANNA MARTINEZ-CRIPPA: The idea of having a favorite is horrible and a parent that can't appreciate each child individually probably shouldn't have more than one. Of course, some relationships are easier than others, but as parents, our responsibility is to appreciate the differences between them.

COX: So we wanted our parents to weigh in on this very sensitive issue and we've called on Jeffrey Kluger. His recent cover story for Time magazine inspired the conversation we're having today. He is a senior editor at Time and author of the book "The Sibling Effect." He has two daughters, by the way.  Shawn Bean, the executive editor at Parenting magazine and father of two boys, one of whom he says is his favorite. We'll let him explain that in just a minute.  And Jolene Ivey, one of our regular contributors for this segment. She is a Maryland state legislator and mother of five boys. Let me welcome all three of you to the program.

JOLENE IVEY: Hey, Tony.

SHAWN BEAN: Hi. Thanks for having me.

JEFFREY KLUGER: Hi. How are you?

COX: I have been really looking forward to having this conversation with the three of you. And Jeffrey Kluger, your article in Time magazine - I know there was another in Parenting, as well - got me thinking, so I want to start with you. Do you really think that all parents have a favorite child?

KLUGER: Well, the short answer is yes. But the caveats and the explanations are a whole lot longer than that single word. And I spell these out, both in the chapter and in the magazine article and also in the book "The Sibling Effect," and part of the book deals with birth order, which is another variable here.

But the study that a lot of this work is based on showed that up to 70 percent of fathers and 65 percent of mothers exhibit a preference for one child over another, usually involuntarily exhibiting that preference. And both of those numbers are almost certainly low-balling it because when you - parents do a very good job of concealing their preferences, so the 25 and 30 percent who don't exhibit a preference almost certainly have one, as well. We're genetically hardwired to have a preference.

COX: Let me bring Jolene in on that before I get to Shawn because she has the most children out of all of us on the panel today. Five boys.

COX: Jeffrey says parents do a good job of concealing and I think I'm paraphrasing here. Do you do a good job of concealing or do you even try?

IVEY: Well, my kids don't think I do a very good job of concealing, but I think that the problem is that they all think that my number two son is my favorite and, for a while, I played into it because I thought it was kind of funny and now it's just family lore, David's my favorite. But in real life, although each of them is my favorite sometimes, maybe David's my favorite more often, but today, Julian is my favorite.

COX: Today, Julian is your favorite.

IVEY: Julian is my favorite because, the other day he said, Mom, you and Dad are so different, but you parent as one. And if people were all raised by parents like you guys, there'd be fewer screwed up people in the world. And I said, this kid - he's my favorite.

COX: Yeah. He sounds like one of those kids that would suck up to Mom and Dad & make them feel he's the favorite.

COX: Hey, what about you, Shawn? You've got two and you made no bones that one is a favorite.

BEAN: Well, and just to make sure that I don't have any family troubles years from now, I've got a seven-year-old and a five-year-old. I don't want to disclose, and which I actually didn't quite do in my blog post on parenting.com, but I

Usually the most I found and the people that I spoke to since reading Jeffrey's story is that the favorite kid is typically the one that makes the parent feel the most needed, whether they have learning disabilities or they need extra emotional support or they just are more clingy. Typically the kid that makes you feel the most needed is the one...

COX: Is that one that's favored.

BEAN: ...is the one that you favor.

COX: All right. If you're just joining us, you're listening to TELL ME MORE from NPR News. I'm Tony Cox sitting in for Michel Martin. Our Parenting panel this week is discussing whether it is inevitable that parents will have a favorite child. We're talking to Jolene Ivey, one of our regular Moms; Shawn Bean, executive editor of Parenting magazine; and Jeffrey Kluger, senior editor at Time, who wrote a cover story about this. Here's another reaction I'd like the three of you to hear. From one of our listeners via Facebook, this is Rena Lopez in Seattle.

RENA LOPEZ: I've been waiting my entire life to expose my mother for favoring my brother. There are four of us kids, three girls - and then the king. The king has reigned over our family for over 40 years. The worst part is, us three girls favor him too.

COX: I think that's just really fascinating. Ms. Lopez actually agrees with her parents' favoritism, but many of our commentators were really hurt, even 40 years later by what they saw as bias by their parent. Another woman wrote that her father actually had a ranking system that he told his kids about.

Jeffrey Kluger, you've written a book about this, about sibling order. And by way of full disclosure, I'm a middle kid, older brother, younger sister, so I always felt they got the best spots and there was nothing left for me. What about that? Do we carry our position where we are in birth order and pass it on to our children?

KLUGER: Well, we don't necessarily pass it on to our children but we do carry the influence of how we were treated and how we felt we ranked in the household throughout our lives. And one of the reasons the birth order and favoritism chapters dovetail so well in my book is because favoritism can be so heavily driven by birth order.

Parents are driven by – now, this is all genetic and unconscious, by the way - but they're driven by an impulse that corporations understand well, which is called sunk costs. By the time your second child comes along, you've had one or two or more years of investing all of your time, all of your energy, all of your money, lots of calories, into raising a child. That child is the furthest along the assembly line to a viable adulthood and leaving a family's genes behind. So that child is the one who will by nature be favored.

The last born often does a very good job of counterbalancing that by learning what are called low power skills. You're the smallest one in the playroom so you obviously don't have any high power skills as a way of defending yourself, so you learn to charm and disarm. You learn humor. You learn intuition. All of these work another kind of power on parents. The middle born is often the one who doesn't get the most goodies. But as your...

COX: Don't I know.

KLUGER: But as your caller pointed out, if you have a birth order sequence - let's say boy girl boy or girl boy girl, the sole gender in the middle can often trump both the firstborn and the last born.

COX: That's interesting. I want to ask a parenting question of you, Shawn, since you're with Parenting magazine, about this damage issue. Is there any evidence that you are aware of that suggests that A) identifying a favorite to a child or the other siblings is harmful, and B) if so, how long does that tend to last? Is it a lifetime?

BEAN: Well, I can only speak from the small sampling that we got in starting this conversation online. It was interesting because Jeffrey's story really took a picture of us as a people from about 5,000 miles up. And where we work on at Parenting is we're actually talking to, you know, moms and dads, you know, in our neighborhoods, at the playgrounds, you know, on our streets and speaking to them. And what I found mostly was there were a few people who were willing to come out and say it. But more, there was a real indignance of trying to bring this topic out. It was almost as if to say, we know you all have Twinkies and cupcakes in the cupboard. You mind if we see what you have? They're like, absolutely not. We don't give saturated fats to our kids. But we all know that we all do and, you know, hopefully in some sort of, you know, under control. But I found that most people under life and limb would not give up who their favorite is.