

Large Families Q and A with Dr. Markham

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:00:00 Hello, this is Dr. Laura Markham. In this audio, I'll be answering some of the most common questions that parents ask about larger families with three or four or more children. Remember, we're always applying our three big ideas. We start by regulating our own emotions and behavior. Then, we connect with our child. Finally, instead of trying to control our child, we coach them to be their best self, both by helping them with their emotions, and by creating an environment where the child can thrive. So let's see how to apply these three big ideas to daily life with children.

Question 1:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:00:41 "How do you self-regulate with multiple kids with multiple needs all at the same time? I feel like as soon as I'm triggered and working to get back to being calm, but before I can even re-engage with the current kid, a different kid is suddenly having a meltdown. There's just crisis after crisis and self-regulation goes out the window."

So first of all, I know you have a seven year old, a five year old, a three year old, and a one year old and when you have that many kids, somebody's always going to be having a problem and that means it's a lot harder to stay calm. It's just the way it is when you choose to have a big family.

So here's the thing about triggers. You have to work on them on your own time and diminish them so they have less power over you. And when you have multiple kids you have to do preventative maintenance, so that there are fewer crises. Meaning you have to work on special time. You have to work on rough housing, you have to find times when you are available to fully attend and listen and you

have somebody else with your other kids, like on a weekend, so that you can have scheduled meltdowns and your kids can cry. And you have to do empathy all the time, whenever you can, in response to everything your kids are doing.

If you do all that, you will have fewer crises, I promise. But you still will have some. So then you have to do the work on your own. When you do get time alone at night, if you can find some alone time -- and you should be able to have some alone time, a little bit of alone time every weekend and maybe even every day after bedtime. During those times, I know you just want to chill, and that's fine to do some of that, but use some of it to heal your triggers. Use some of it to nurture yourself, which gives you an added layer of resources internally so that you can handle things better.

All of that means you will get triggered less. And then in that moment when you do get triggered, when something's going on with a child and you do get triggered, you said you're working to get back to calm before you can re-engage. So stop, drop your agenda, take a deep breath, breathe deeply, try to get calm. And then all of a sudden some other kid has a meltdown.

At that moment, your job is managing yourself. So you talk yourself off the cliff. So you need a little mantra to say to yourself like, "It's not an emergency, it's just a family." Or whatever is going to calm you down. Because in fact it **is** mini-crisis after mini-crisis. But that's just life. That is the way it is in a family. And there's nothing to get so upset about.

There is nothing to get triggered about. So I know you were triggered to start. So you just ruefully say to yourself, "Well, we don't have the luxury of a long recovery right now. Got another little mini-crisis. I can do this." And you can. And you take your deep breath.

Then you have to make one of those snap decisions. Whose problem is the biggest? If all of a sudden the three year old is clobbering the one year old, that's probably more important to go intervene, than continuing to argue with your seven year old about whether they should set the table or whatever. So at that point you take your deep breath and you smile at your seven year old as well as you can and you say, "To be continued," and you leave and you go intervene in the next crisis with the three year old and the one year old. You are going to have to flow, even though there's no flow, you have to create the flow.

There's a Marianne Williamson line I really like, which is, "When something is missing from a situation, it's our job to supply it." And you said there's no flow in this situation, just crisis after crisis. So I'm going to suggest you think of yourself as the flow. You're creating a flow of goodness and orderliness in your house.

So think of yourself as the world's best preschool teacher. What you're doing is, you've got your hand on one child, you're speaking across the room to another child to stop them from whatever they're doing. And then you shift gears and you refocus on the child that you have your hand on and then you're looking up and you're speaking to another child. So you're constantly in this relationship with, well for you, four different children, noticing what's going on with them. And they're following your lead. You're the center of their existence. And you're providing the flow based on what needs to be done at any given moment. So triage, you know, whatever's the biggest emergency at the moment.

And your challenge is, how calm can I stay in the face of these various little mini-crises that happen? How can I create flow? And it sounds like that's not so easy for you, but it is possible to do. So your job in each instance is to keep that center of calm inside you. And the only way to do that is to make sure you do some self-care, including

some meditation and some exercise, every single day. It doesn't have to be a lot of exercise. You can put on the music and dance with your kids. If your older kids are at school, you can take the little ones jogging in a double stroller. But some amount of exercise and meditation every day is going to be essential for you to stay centered in the face of the mini-crisis after mini-crisis after mini-crisis. And watch yourself do it, admire yourself, give yourself real admiration for how you're able to create that flow, to stay calm, and to be quick on your feet. It's the dance of parenthood and it's not easy, but you will grow by doing it.

Question 2:

Parent: 00:07:09 I have five children, a lot ... yes. And so a lot of the stuff you know talks about special time and connecting with your kids in the context of two or three. And we've been traditionally parenting. I discovered you like four or five years ago and tried to pick up peaceful parenting techniques. It's been really tough. I've got my oldest of 11. I have an 11 year old, a 10 year old, an eight year old. Those are all boys. And then I have a six year old girl and then my rainbow baby is a one year old boy.

Parent: And I have found, I know there's a lot of repair work to do. I know we've got from years of traditional parenting and difficulties. My oldest has ADHD and anxiety and my third really struggles with perfectionism. And so we have all those extra things to deal with. And I know that if I can get the connecting piece down, that a lot of the defiance and the other things that make peaceful parenting really hard with five kids can be lessened. But I'm just struggling so much with trying to figure out how on earth to get special time.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I get it. It's very hard with five kids. I hear you. And yet, and yet it is also, as I also hear in your question, it is also super important to have that one on one time. Because with five kids they're always having to share mom and dad and so it becomes even more important that you have one on one time with them. So I would just say that they are capable of letting you have one on one time with a sibling. I mean they're old enough for that. Even a six year old is old enough for that, if you structure it so that they have something else to do. But they're not necessarily enrolled to do it, right?

So I guess I would suggest that you find a way -- first of all, to do it on the weekends so that they start to really like special time. So I assume your partner is home on the weekends, and that way you can ... I would say not the one-year-old -- the one-year-old doesn't need it -- but the other four need time with you on the weekend.

And I would say, yeah they need time with dad too, but I would start with the time with you, because their experience, the children's experience, is that they're always sharing you.

So I would ask your partner to watch the other four and I would take one child at a time and I would say, and even if it means it's two hours on Saturday and two hours on Sunday. Do two of them on Saturday and do two of them on Sunday and give them each a lot of time, like an hour. That is just one on one time. You don't even have to take them out or spend money on them or do anything special in that sense.

Dr. Laura Markham:

They just need to know that's their time with mom and whatever, you may need to take them out to a park or a playground or something, unless your partner can take the others all out of the house so that you can be in the house with them. Or you can be in a room with the door shut

with them if you have a bedroom that they're not sharing with another kid, or a basement or your room.

So once they do that one on one time with you for an hour every single weekend for like three weeks, you're going to find that they love it so much. Then you say, "What do you think about the idea of doing special time during the week and doing less time, like 20 minutes? But we could do it on Tuesdays and Thursdays? Or we could do one kid on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. And so of those four days, each of you could have 20 minutes on one of those days. And so Tuesday would be so-and-so's day, the 11 year old's day or whatever, the six year olds day."

I think you would find when you bring that up that they would all say, "Yeah, we love special time. We love when you do this with us on weekends. We would like that."

And then you can say, "Okay, well what that means is on the day that's your day, you get your time with me. But on the day that's not your day, you have to be with the other kids doing something else. Something that is just for you guys." And I would put one of your kids in charge. So first of all I would rough house with all five children to get them all laughing and in a good mood.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You know you wouldn't try to do this when somebody is in a bad mood, that's the first thing you do (roughhousing) as part of your routine, in the afternoon once they get home from school. And then I would have them, I mean 11, 10 and eight year old are probably capable of doing some homework themselves. I do hear there's some anxiety issues at least in the 11 and eight year old, but they might be able to sit and do homework themselves. And you could give the six year old a project to work on, whether it's a special box or sensory bag or even a worksheet that's a pretend homework like the big kids get to do. And you could have the 11 year old be in charge of the other kids, except at the time on Thursdays when it's the 11 year old's

day for 20 minutes, and then the 10 year olds in charge on that day. I think as long as you've enrolled all the kids in the way that special time works, and you make it this part of the routine and it's the same time every day.

All the kids know that this is the 20 minutes when Mom has special time with a sibling, except for my day when I get it with her one-on-one. During that time I get to work on my homework or I get to read a book. It's quiet reading time or something. I think what you'd find is that they would be -- because they'd been sold on the idea because you started doing it on weekends -- I think you'd find that they were more amenable.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And I just want to say it is harder to do special time with big families, and it's harder to do peaceful parenting in general with big families. I think it's hard to have a big family because there's so many more, not just mouths to feed, but psyches to give love to. But big families have their own wonder and delight and the children become a team. And they have each other long after you're gone and they can be very special. So I really love that you're using special time and the other peaceful parenting tools, all the peaceful parenting tools, with your big family. And they're lucky kids.

Question 3:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:13:44

This parent says her three year old is very aggressive from previous bad parenting, feeling neglected when the baby sister was born, lots of timeouts, etc. But the problem is the older kids age eight and six are really resenting him for breaking their stuff and screaming at them. So there's also a baby. So there's an eight year old, a six year old, a three year old and a baby. So first of all, my hats off to you Cassidy. That's a lot of parenting to do, to stay calm. Congratulations for tackling this and for employing these ideas. You're trying special time. You've stopped doing timeouts. But he throws huge fits, it sounds like. And

you're asking if you should hold him until he calms down, which makes him more angry and feels like a punishment? I would say no.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You know what fear looks like when kids are upset is, it looks like a two year old's tantrum. So even though he's three he's going to be on the floor writhing and kicking and screaming. And hopefully he's not attacking you. If he's actually attacking you, you're going to have to say that you're going to hold him until he stops attacking and he'll say he's going to stop attacking and then he'll attack you again. This might go on 20 times, you letting him go and him attacking. You're holding him, but you can say, " I don't want to hold you. I know that upsets you. But if I need to hold you to keep you from attacking me, I will." That's the only time that you would hold a child who's upset. Otherwise, I would never hold a child against their will. It would only be if they're attacking you and you can't get them to not attack you otherwise.

So this is a full backpack issue. You've obviously made a lot of progress in this course, but you're also -- this is a child who really needs to cry. He needs 24/7 empathy from you. He needs special time every day. He's got a little sister. He hasn't gotten over that. He needs laughter, lots of laughter. And this is a kid who needs to cry every single day.

So maybe there's a full backpack scheduled meltdown every single day, when you have another adult around who can take the other three kids.

Also, I would explain to his siblings. I would try to protect them as much as possible. That's your responsibility. But I would explain to them also. They're much older, their responsibility as older siblings is to help him. His behavior is totally unfair to them, you get that. You're going to try to keep them safe and you're going to try to keep their

belongings safe. And you have a plan to help your son be different by supporting him to empty his backpack.

Question 4:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:16:08

Our next question is from a parent who says “Our six and a half year old has been having a difficult grumpy personality since his brother was born, but it's not getting any better. And his brother is now two. He's hitting, pushing the younger one, he doesn't share 99% of the time and he seems to enjoy teasing and making him cry all the time. How can we teach him to be more empathic, to share, to be more brotherly loving with the two and a half year old?”

I am so sorry that your kids are having to go through this and you're having to go through this. It's a normal reaction to be upset when the baby's born and it sounds like your son never got to work through that and he is still resenting it.

So I would say, first of all, don't make him share. He already has to share his parents.

Dr. Laura Markham:

He has a chip on his shoulder that he's never gotten past from when the baby was born. So making him share is the worst thing you can do. It sounds to me like you have not read my sibling book or even the website, which does have an article on how to teach kids to share. And what it says is the way you create generosity is not to force them to share. And there's a whole theory about it and a whole set of instructions for how to handle it and the research does support it. So I'm going to suggest you look up sharing on the Aha Parenting website and take a look at that article about how to teach kids to share.

And then your question about his difficult and grumpy personality. Clearly, if that's what happened since his

brother was born, he hasn't gotten past those feelings yet. He has what we call a chip on the shoulder toward his brother. I'm so sorry that you didn't find me until now and begin to work on this because two and a half years later, it means their relationship is probably not in very good shape. As we can see by the fact that he likes teasing his brother and making him cry.

So the week on siblings has a whole thing on how to deal with this. It's a big project. It's going to take you six months of intensive work with your six year old and helping him work through these feelings. You'll have to use the peaceful parenting tools, but you're also going to have to be doing a lot of talking and a lot of listening so he can tell you how awful his life has been since his brother was born, but better now than waiting until his brother's five.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You asked, how do you teach him to be more empathic or loving? You can't. You can only help him with the angry feelings that are getting in the way of him feeling loving and empathic. There's no way you can teach him to act that way when he feels something so different deep inside. So this is deep work and if necessary I would even consider getting help. But I think you can do this if you just use the information in the sibling book and on the website and really make a project of it. I'm really sorry. It's hard when kids get that chip on their shoulder, but it is possible to heal it.

Question 5:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:19:31

Our next question is about large families, who not only can't find time for special time, but can't even find time to deal with sibling conflicts or handle a meltdown. She says,

Dr. Laura Markham:

“Four children, I feel like I’m nearly always in fight, flight or freeze!”

And you know, that’s true. This kind of parenting is hard when kids are little, so by definition, if you have a lot of young children, it’s going to be even harder for you.

So one thing is, if you -- some people said that they were hoping for a large family -- I would just say, space your kids out. If you can space your kids at least three or four years apart, it helps a lot, because the kids get easier and it takes less time for each child as they get older.

I would also say, remember, now is a transitional time. Helping even one child empty a full backpack is a big deal. And so it will help you if you can get through the backpack emptying stage and into daily life that’s more peaceful, you’ll find that it becomes easier, with a large family, because you have fewer unpredictable blow-ups.

I do want to say that when you’ve chosen to have a large family, you have to expect an additional cost (emotionally as well as financially). Like, the US government estimates that each child is going to cost you somewhere between \$250,000 and half a million dollars, not including college...It’s crazy, and it depends where you live in the country, but it’s very costly to have an additional child.

So if you don’t yet have a big family but you’re planning on more kids, make sure you’re waiting until your kids are old enough to wait without an upset for something they need from you. Wait until they’ve emptied their backpacks, and they’re happy and cooperative. Wait until they’re sleeping well. Wait until you feel like your marriage is on an even keel.

Don’t feel like you have to space your kids close together for some reason. Doing this kind of parenting will be a lot easier if they’re further apart.

And obviously with a big family, it's all hands on deck. You can't have a parent who's working all the time, or routinely traveling. And you have to be more organized. And you have to schedule everything, basically. You have to mandate quiet time after lunch. You have to mandate a fifteen minute family cleanup every morning and every night. There are just things that large families use as a general practice, to make life easier that you need to do.

And I would say something else you need to do, that I don't usually read about it, you must create a stash of boxes for each child with their name on it, like a bin that you can put up in a closet and pull down. When one kid is having a meltdown, go pull down some of those boxes, the ones for the other kids -- and let them get started on using those boxes. I talk about this in my sibling book in more detail, so you can take a look at what I'm suggesting, but basically a sensory bag or box for each child. And you really just have to be prepared, because you will have some times when you can't tend to those kids.

And then I really appreciated when you said "My goal is to connect with my three children daily. This may sound crazy, but I work for 10 minutes each of my full attention."

I'm with you. That's what's realistic. And you know, I'm hoping that you get to do more on the weekend, that maybe you have a partner who's there on the weekend with you, and you can find a way to do longer time than the 10 minutes each.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But even 10 minutes with you daily with each child, I think makes a tremendous difference to that child. What children need is for you to delight in them, because that's what makes them feel like they're a worthwhile human being who has a right to be here and can value themselves and feel good about who they are. I think that's what really grows healthy children, is our delight in them. So

you know, you can't delight in your child when you're resentful. So the thing children need most is for us to maintain our feeling of wellbeing, to monitor ourselves throughout the day and to put ourselves back into a good mood, so we can be emotionally generous and delight in our child.

That's what we need to do. And that's more important than special time and it's more important than anything because it allows us to, in the moment, respond to what our child needs. So that when we realize -- "Oh, she needs a snuggle, Oh, he needs a meltdown, Oh, we should really do some laughing around here," -- Then you can do it because you're in a good place. You have the foundation of wellbeing to start from.

So I'm going to say again, start where you are. Use what you have, do what you can, and every night before you go to sleep, just express appreciation to yourself, and to the universe for supporting you. And the next morning you get up and you try again and that's all anyone can really do. And the good news is, that's enough.

Question 6:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:24:24

This question says, "What did you consider as a doctor and a mother when you decided to have a second child?" I would just say, you know, every family's different. The decision I made is going to be different for other people. I grew up in a family with lots of siblings. My parents were divorced, they had three kids, they got divorced and then they had more kids in each new family. So I had siblings, three of us in the first family and then half siblings -- and I saw that there wasn't enough attention to go around. Now I also love my siblings and I'm really glad they're all there, but every sibling made things more complicated. So I guess

I would ask you, do you have a lot of support in your family? Does one of you have to travel a lot for work?

Dr. Laura Markham:

Cause if so, don't have another kid. You need to be all hands on deck for a while when you have another kid. How much support do you have? Do you have family nearby who you trust to leave with your kids and to you know, to spell you? That support really matters.

If you have a challenging child, you can count on your child getting more challenging when you have another child. It just happens that way. That's what the research shows.

And if you have been peaceful parenting for a long time, you'll find it easier to add another child to your family because your older child or children will be less challenging. But if you're making a transition now, it can take a while to make the transition to peaceful parenting. And I will say straight out, if your children are older, it's harder to make the transition to peaceful parenting. We know that.

And if you have a large family, it's harder to make the transition to peaceful parenting because helping a kid empty an emotional backpack takes a lot of time. And when you're transitioning, you're doing a lot of backpack emptying.

So if you feel like your family is in a very good, peaceful place and you want another child, you know, great. If you don't, then wait until it's a little easier.

And I know a lot of people have a bias about child spacing. I talk about this a lot in the sibling book, actually, at the beginning of it. So, do read that. And I would just say, kids who are spaced closer together are actually closer emotionally, but they also fight more. So it's harder on the parents. And so the only way I would have kids close

together is if you're confident in your ability to stay calm most of the time.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I personally did not think I could be the mother I wanted to be if my kids were spaced close together. So I waited until my son was three and a half, and at that point I started trying to get pregnant.

So I just would encourage you to think in terms of time. Every child needs an hour or two a day from you. And that's not really very much. It could be more time. And so where's that extra hour or more a day going to come from? You know, given that you're busy 24/7.

Of course it gets easier as they get older. I found that in the teen years I had nothing to do, and even in the preteen years, but I was always still there. And so I think you still have to focus on connection, but it gets much easier as they get older.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So if you're going to have more kids, you're deciding that you're prioritizing that, and investing more resources in your family. You're going to have to be more organized. You're going to have to create a stash of sensory bags or boxes for each child so you can pull them out when you need to. You're going to need to prioritize spending one on one time with each child.

And you know what? You have to prioritize self care because what your children need more than anything, even more than rough housing, even more than special time, your children need you to be in a good mood. So monitoring your own wellbeing.

So I would ask you, if you're thinking about another child, how good are you at self care? Can you love yourself through your upsets? Can you monitor your own wellbeing? Can you tend to your own needs instead of getting angry?

Dr. Laura Markham:

Start there. You don't have to be perfect. But start there. If you can answer in the affirmative to all those questions, then of course, have another baby. If you can't.... You know, maybe you're not in control of when your other baby's coming. Maybe you're pregnant with another child right now. It's a blessing. It's just more work for you and more of a challenge. And you know, I myself, the reason I recommend peaceful parenting kinds of techniques for things like, I don't know, virtually everything -- potty training, sleep -- is that it's less traumatic for everyone involved. And so I'd like to see your family have more peace and less drama.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I always think you have to, as you think about adding more children to the family, remember that every new baby is a blessing and a source of love -- and also a source of stress. And so start with yourself. Look at yourself. Is that something you're ready to sign up for at this time? You know, so it's a very individual decision. I don't pretend to know what's right for anybody else and I wish you luck making that decision for yourself.

Question 7:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:29:23

This parent is saying, my kids have not been behaving ever since I stopped punishing. I know that connection is important, but I have four of them. What am I supposed to do to give them individual time?

So I think if you have four kids, it's really super hard to have time for all of them. You've got a baby, babies are needy. You've got a three year old, three year olds are needy. And you know, your seven and six year old may not be as needy, but they're close together in age. They could be needy too. I understand.

So set up a schedule where everybody gets some of your time. Even if you're not announcing it exactly, a special time, that every day when the one-year-olds napping, you somehow do a staggered nap, so the three year old gets time with you. Or if the three year old and the one-year-old nap together at the same time, then that's when the seven and six year olds get your time, for instance.

Make sure you get time for each kid every day. Right now it's going to mean you don't get other things done. Other things drop off your list. Think of this as a huge project that you're doing to change your life and your children's lives. This transition depends on connection. It depends on it. If you don't get the connection time, they're not going to behave themselves.

So sit down with your partner and figure out when the connection time can happen and you know, maybe when your partner gets home there can be some connection time. Maybe there's more connection time on weekends, whatever it is. You're going to have to give something up. You're a mom of four children, you already had a full life, but you're going to have to give something up to have enough time to have one on one time with each of your kids.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And I would say, even if it's not special time every day with each kid, when your kids are -- when your one-year-old is happy for even two minutes, leave the one-year-old in the swing or the chair, and go over and sit down next to one of the other kids. And just pour your love into them. Notice what they're doing and say, "I love to watch you play with your train or your dollhouse" or whatever they're doing. Just notice them. "Wow. I see you're really working hard on that train track." Just help them feel seen. Because there's lots of different kinds of connections. Special time is only one of them.

Also come up with games that you can play with all four of them at once. Take the one-year-old and let the one-year-old be a football and run the one-year-old around through the other ones, bowling them over or letting them try to tackle you or whatever.

Dr. Laura Markham:

They'll all laugh. And that is really helpful. And that does build connection in the whole family and between the siblings, with each other. Between-siblings connection is also a really important part of what you do. And there's a lot of advice in the sibling book about how to do that.

Question 8:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:32:00

Here's a question. Both parents work. Long hours, sometimes evening work. It's always a challenge to get four children bathed, bed, brushed, into bed. 10, seven, five and two are the ages. "Our five-year-old has meltdowns for no reason. Like I took the baby brother out of the tub first and she demands that I put the baby brother back in the tub. This occurs -- some variation of this -- at least twice a week. How do I deal with this and getting the kids to bed? I can't cut back my hours at work any further?"

This is so hard, you know, first of all it's harder because we work and so there's much more pressure on us when we come home, to have to move the kids through the schedule. Second thing, there are four children. Four children is a lot harder to manage than two children. And you're having to divide your time between them. And none of them are seeing you all day, I'm presuming, in your case. And they all want your attention so it's just harder, right?

And then I would say the specific thing that you're describing, your five-year-old's behavior, this controlling behavior, it's a perfect example of a full backpack. She's trying so hard to control your behavior as an attempt to manage her own strong emotions. She's trying to repress them, and they're coming up, and she's ordering **you** around, basically to start a fight with you or to try to control those emotions that are coming up inside her. So I would just try to open up space for her to have her crying spell and empathize with her. And I know that it's hard when you're trying to get three other children to bed. So if your partner's there, and one of you can take the other three kids and one of you can just empathize with a five year old, this will give the five year old a chance to work it through.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You just say, "Oh Honey, you're so upset. I took your brother out first, right? Oh no, we're not going to put him back in the tub. Your dad is taking him off to get him dry and into PJ's. I know you wish **you** were first out of the tub, right? Everyone likes to be first. That is so upsetting. You're so disappointed, because **you** wanted to get out first and I did it wrong, didn't I? Oh my goodness, no wonder you're sad and mad. I am right here with a hug when you're ready."

And let her have her meltdown. So this is exactly what I talk about when I talk about scheduled meltdowns. This is a kid who's ready to cry, so she's putting an unreasonable request on you. A demand is the way to say it. And if you give in to her demand, she's just going to have another one in five minutes.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But if you can be kind and understanding, but not give into her demand, she's going to have a meltdown. And you know, is it really a scheduled meltdown? No. It would have been better to have it (schedule it) when you weren't tired at the end of the day, trying to get three other children to bed plus her. But it's the only time you can do the

meltdown because this is when you're home and she's home and this is when she's having the meltdown.

So if it's a weekend, yay, do it, go for it. If you don't have time to do it, because it's bedtime during the week, you're the only adult there and you have three other kids, you can still say those words as you dry off her brother. Tell her you love her, you see how disappointed she is and you're going to take her out of the tub and you see and she's crying by now.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And you see how disappointed she is and she's having such a hard time and you're ready with a hug when she's ready, but you just need to dry your brother off too. And you know, you're just going to have to plan on, she's going to -- maybe she'll pull it together, maybe she won't. Maybe she'll have the meltdown and there's nothing you can do about it. But remember, as long as you're following this kind of an approach to parenting, she will soon have an opportunity to cry. And then you won't find her making these demands.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I think you just have to muddle through as much as you can if you're the only parent there and look for the first opportunity to actually do a scheduled meltdown, right? Remember, these feelings are hard. You just acknowledge that to her and tell her that everyone needs to cry and show their mom and dad, who love them, when they feel sad or mad.

Your answer to how to get four kids to bed? Connect as soon as you come home. Connect with each one. Don't leap right into the routine. They need your love more than anything else, or they can't cooperate with you. Gordon Neufeld would say -- he said it beautifully -- You have to collect your children emotionally before they can follow you and cooperate with you.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would also say make a schedule that ensures that each child, even your seven and 10 year old, get some connection time with you, because otherwise they get overlooked. I would say enroll them to be in charge of themselves as much as they can. So the seven and 10 year olds still need your encouragement, but once they've connected with you, they can take pleasure in being in charge of themselves. on a schedule that they create with you. They can take photos and create a schedule with you and you give them lots of high fives, but they can take pleasure in that mastery.

And I would say simplify everything. Don't cook, have something really easy to serve for dinner already made that you just heat up really fast. If you have a nanny at home with the four kids, she can bathe the little ones before you even get home.

Dr. Laura Markham:

That would be great. Maybe feed them. If they're in daycare and you're picking up kids as you go on your way home, maybe you can reduce the baths or do them every other day instead of every day, or even less often than that. It's easier if you have the same routine every day, it's true -- but baths take a lot of time and you can use the time to roughhouse, you can use the time to connect.

Just keep your routine very simple on weekdays. You have four children, you have a demanding job. Just postpone everything but love.

Question 9:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:37:46

So the next question is about how to use empathy and emotion coaching in tough situations. So in this situation, she's just gotten home. She has three boys, they're all

tired and hungry. So one's five, one's three, and then there's the baby. They've just gotten home from kindergarten, and she's trying to get lunch together. And the three-year-old and the five-year-old are sitting at the table across from each other, calling each other names, and it's escalating. But they're not really angry and there's no obvious trigger like anybody hurting each other. They're just calling each other poo-poo head and whatever.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So first of all, if they're not obviously angry, then it may be that there's no real issue here. You can ignore them, right? You don't have to be involved every time your children call each other poo-poo head.

You also said you don't want to sit by and let them treat each other badly if anything is really hurtful. In that case, then there is anger and there is an upset happening. As I see that question, I see that it's a little hard to tell what's going on, reading your question, but my suspicion is that sometimes they're not really that angry and they're just playing around and they're bored. But then, as they're talking back and forth to each other, things escalate and then hurtful things get said. So I think really the answer is always preventive maintenance.

Dr. Laura Markham:

When you first pick them up at kindergarten... pick the five-year-old up at kindergarten -- before you go, make sure you've done some roughhousing with the three year old. Make sure that nobody is starving. Feed them a healthy snack, the three-year-old and the one-year-old, before you go for the five-year-old. Make sure they had a snack. You probably think you shouldn't feed them because you're about to give them a healthy lunch. I say, children this age have small stomachs, they have limited attention span for eating, and you can give them a piece of lunch in advance, something healthy. Give them a hard boiled egg. Give them something that's healthy, that's going to hold them before you even go to pick up the five-

year-old, so they're not at the end of their ropes. When you pick up the five-year-old, you can assume that he is going to be out of sorts. He just came from kindergarten. He's held himself together all morning. That's hard, and so you want to have a snack for him on the way home. He's probably hungry. Blood sugar is low.

Dr. Laura Markham:

When children's blood sugar is low, it sends them into fight or flight. I know it's crazy, but they get these panic hormones circulating in their system that tell them it's an emergency, they could die. And so seriously, when they're hungry, they freak out. All children need to have food on a regular basis that can keep them going, protein specifically. And so I would bring something for him to eat in the car or on the walk home, if you're walking home. And I would also try to get him laughing on the walk home. And maybe there's some way of doing some sort of roughhousing. Even if you're picking him up at kindergarten, maybe there can be a little snack and a little playing at the kindergarten, at the playground there, if there's a playground, because that will get him laughing. And once they've laughed and eaten, you're going to find that their behavior is a hundred times better.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You're also asking, "What about empathy and emotion coaching?" I wouldn't start with empathy and emotion coaching in this instance. I would start with meeting their needs, and that changes the situation. So meeting their needs is about laughter for your five-year-old and food for all three kids. But when you do end up in a situation where your children are calling each other poo-poo head, or whatever, and saying, "I hate you," you can say, "Wow, I hear some mean things getting said that could hurt somebody's feelings. Are you two mad at each other, or are you having fun? Is this a game where you're having fun?" And they're going to say one way or the other, are they having fun or not? They're going to tell you.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And so at that point, you're going to have to intervene based on what they say. So maybe one kid says, "We're having fun." And the other kid says, "I'm not having fun. I hate him." At which point you say, "Sweetheart, if you don't like what's happening, you can tell your brother. Tell him, 'I'm not having fun. Don't call me names. We don't call names in this house.'" So you're emotion coaching him to stand up for himself.

What most of us do is we jump in and we say, "Don't you call your brother names." And it's okay to restate your house rule, we don't call names. But actually what you want to say is, "Sweetheart, you can tell your brother. Tell him, 'Don't call me names. We don't call names in this house.'" And that way, you're coaching your child to stand up for himself in a way that doesn't attack the other person, but keeps his dignity. And that's what we want to do with siblings always, is teaching them that they can stand up for themselves without attacking the other person. So, that's basic emotion coaching.

Question 10:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:42:31

Our next parent says she struggles with getting the balance right on what is fair for her four children and they tend to take things to the extreme and make her count all the raisins. And she realizes that the underlying cause is sibling rivalry. Good for you. That is exactly true. And she's working on that, but the kids still want everything to be fair.

So first of all, there's a whole section in my sibling book on this, so I'm going to give you sort of a short answer, but here are the things you want to pay attention to. First of all, when your kids express feelings about fairness -- "It's not fair" -- don't argue with them. Empathize with them. If

they say, "I never get to go first!" Don't say, "Of course you do," Say, "It feels like you never get to go first, huh?"

And don't explain: "He's older so he gets to stay up later." Just empathize. "It's hard to stop playing and get ready for bed. I know you wish you could stay up later. I bet when you're eight like your brother, you'll love staying up later." So, that's empathizing when they express feelings of unfairness.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Second, focus on what they (actually) want, rather than getting hooked when they compare or compete. Instead of arguing with them when they say that their sibling got more, you can say, "Huh, it sounds like you think your sister got more noodles. It sounds like you're ready for more noodles. Show me how much you want and I'll dish them out for you." So it's not about what their sister got, it's that they want more, and that's fine.

And if there aren't any more noodles, or if it's dessert and you're not going to give them any more of that, you might say something like, "Oh no, his piece was bigger? I can't believe it. That's terrible. Here I sat making sure the two pieces were exactly the same, and you're telling me my splitting skills are slipping? You know what that means? If your piece was even a hundredth smaller, that means I need to make it up to you with 100 kisses and hugs." And then you grab your kid and fill them up with love.

Dr. Laura Markham:

You're not teasing them. You're not belittling their need. You're letting them know that there's more than enough love for them, no matter what their sibling gets.

Also, when you give material possessions, do it based on need. Be sure love is limitless, but material possessions are (based on) need. So if they outgrow their current pair of sneakers and need them, they get a new pair. But if they don't, they don't get a new pair, even if their sibling does.

Also, you'll be interested to know that several studies in which children were interviewed about how parents treated them and their siblings found that kids don't mind being treated differently if they think the outcome is fair. So they may give you a hard time because their brother stays up later, but they do understand that an older child gets more privileges and more responsibilities. In fact, you might want to talk with each child before their birthday, what new responsibility do they think they're ready for? So it's okay to treat them differently, just make sure you have a rationale for that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

That's all I'm going to say right now for this, but I do think that most of it is making sure that your child feels like there could not be more love given to anybody than there is to them. The reason kids compete is to ensure their survival in the face of scarce resources. So your job is to love each of your children so that they know that there is no way you could ever love anyone more than you love them.

Question 11:

Parent: 00:45:58 My question is about my nine-year-old... So I've got a four-year-old boy, a seven-year-old girl, and a nine-year-old girl. And the nine-year-old, I think, has a chip on her shoulder, and it's all the latest things from the week 11, the sibling week, kind of hit home. But I'm not certain. I'm not sure. I think she does, but I don't want to lead it -- I don't want to encourage it. I don't want to do any leading questions with her. But I just wanted to describe a few things to you and just hear what you have to say.

Parent: If anyone's got anything new and shiny, she's there, she wants it. And it'll quite often end up in her room. If anyone's having special time, she gets a bit jealous and she'll act out a little bit and she wants to know when hers is. If anyone goes to Grandma's for example, and it's not

her, she gets a bit grumpy, "Why didn't I go?" She's always checking how much people have got. I mean, we have this tradition that's Saturday sweets. We go and get Saturday sweets from the sweet shop. So we don't ask on any other day of the week, I guess is the idea. And she's always checking on, "How much has my brother got? How much has my sister got?" And if you deal anything out... Cake. If you cut cake up, you can see and feel it. I can see it in her eyes, feel it in her body. She's checking. She's assessing the size of the cake and she's choosing the biggest piece all the time. Or if I give it out myself, she's saying, Can I have that one that Hugo's got? And I know it's because she thinks it's bigger. Those are the kinds of things I'm seeing. Is that chip on shoulder or...

Dr. Laura Markham:

Yes it is, but it's a very specific kind. It doesn't sound like she's automatically angry all the time at her siblings for being born. It does sound like a child who had siblings and began to feel like she wasn't getting her own needs met, so she has to fight for those. She has to work hard to make sure she gets what she needs because she may not automatically get it, because there's other people in line. Right? That's what it sounds like.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you know, you're not going to be creating any bad feelings by acknowledging that. You know, you're not creating something that's not there. You can simply acknowledge what's going on right now for her in that moment in the sweet shop and say, "That looks like a nice piece your brother got, huh? Seems like you want to make sure your piece is just as good. Oh Sweetie." And then you give her a little hug and you say, "Oh Sweetie, you know what? There are always more sweets in the world. There will always be enough for you. Don't worry, you don't have to fight to get what you need."

You know what ends up happening? Because our families are... parents are always trying to extend their attention

and there's too little time. I think so often, kids grow up with a sense of scarcity. Love is scarce.

But the truth is love is not scarce. Even sweets, truthfully, are not scarce once you don't have parents telling you can't have them. I think for all of our children, (we need) to address that with a sense of humor and great love and compassion. You're not belittling them, and you're not making light of what they need or want, but you're just reassuring them it's really going to be fine, and I understand why you'd feel this way.

And you can even add, if it becomes an ongoing little riff between you, you can even add, "You know, I think when you were little and your brother was born, you found that you didn't always get what you needed because we were so busy taking care of all of you. And so I think sometimes you're still remembering that. But don't worry Sweetie, there's more than enough for everybody."

Parent:

Yeah. Yeah. She won't pass things down to her seven-year-old sister, her clothes and shoes. She holds onto it when it doesn't fit her anymore.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Yes. It's part of the same thing. Yes. I think it's the same thing. And I think you can say to her... I wouldn't force her to pass things down, actually, because I think it would exacerbate this tendency she already has. But I think I would say to her, "It seems like it's really important for you to have those shoes, even though they would pinch your feet terribly if you wore them. Right? But you want to make sure that you get everything you need, and Sweetheart, we are going to make sure you get everything you need. It's okay." You know? But I wouldn't belittle her. I would just offer that understanding. I think you'll see her begin to relax a little about it.

Parent:

Yeah. Okay. Thank you.

Dr. Laura Markham: Thank you.

Question 12:

Parent: 00:50:38 So I had a question about really just kind of limits and expectations for kids, and what's acceptable and what's not. I know you talk a lot about not having punishments, and not using bribes and things like that. But there are instances when one of your kids is hurting the other, and that's just not acceptable.

Parent: One thing I feel like I really struggle with is, let's say one of my kids hit the other, what am I supposed to do in that kind of a situation, if for instance, they won't do as I told them to, whether that be like, "Okay, why don't you just go play over here, or why don't you guys just separate" and then they don't obey, it just feels like they're not really changing any kind of behavior when there are no logical consequences.

Parent: They have a neurological condition called PANDAS and their brains can be inflamed by viruses and strep, and in that kind of a moment, they're very reptilian-brained and you can't even really get through to them, for them to hear me. Ultimately, my biggest question though, is how do I get the kids to behave a certain way or not hurt each other when we can't use... you're trying not to use consequences and punishment and things like that for hurting one... It's like, how do I remove the kid from the situation and prevent them from hurting another sibling?

Dr. Laura Markham: How old are your children?

Parent: They're five, seven and eight.

- Dr. Laura Markham: Okay. And I assume you're new to this course. I assume you've been using consequences, maybe time-outs or other punishments right along. Is that correct?
- Parent: Right. Yeah. So I know that there's a, in theory, a transition period where they're going to have to learn the way in which we're going to deal with this kind of thing, going forward. I think my concern is more hurting each other is just not okay. Or in that kind of situation, as a peaceful parent, how are we supposed to intervene in such a way that is not using our... we don't want to use our bodies and things like that. You know?
- Dr. Laura Markham: Here's the thing. You've been, for eight years now, using -- or maybe only for seven, since your second child was born seven years ago -- You've been using consequences to intervene, to get your kids to stop hitting each other. And yet, they're still hitting each other. You said, "Well, if I can't use punishment and consequences, how do I get them to stop hitting each other?"
- Dr. Laura Markham: But you're telling me that you've been using punishment and consequences for seven years and it hasn't stopped them from hitting each other. So, that clearly doesn't work. We should figure out something that does work.
- Dr. Laura Markham: Now, you're saying, "But we can't just do nothing." I agree with you completely. It is not okay to hit each other. You can't just do nothing. You have to intervene when your kids hit.
- But I think by the time your kids are hitting, you're in the breakdown lane. It's like, your kids are hitting each other, and where we really needed to intervene was about 10 steps back, to prevent the hitting, as opposed to at this moment.
- I will say that when kids have PANDAS, it is a lot harder, because even though they feel connected to you, even

though you work hard at connection, they have much less impulse control. And when they're very angry, it's very hard for them to control themselves.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Now, that's true of all children, but it's especially true if kids have an issue like this. It's a neurological issue. So no matter how connected you are, that it is going to be harder for your kids to control themselves.

But connection is only one of the tools. Remember, the tools that you've been given in this course are about helping kids deal with emotion. And the more kids have upsets that they carry around with them, the harder it's going to be for them to control themselves -- i.e., a full backpack.

It's not only that the consequences you've been doing for seven years haven't worked, it's **also** that those consequences give them a full backpack.

So when you said, in theory you know there's a transition, it's way of invalidating something. You're saying, "Well in theory there's a transition, but in reality..." Well, in reality there's a transition.

Dr. Laura Markham:

In fact, in reality, the transition is your kids have seven years of carrying around emotions in a full backpack. They need help to laugh and to cry -- and to talk about, since they're seven and eight -- to get out. And so, if you don't do that, in theory and in practice, they will hit each other. There's no way around it.

That's the prevention. That's how you really get them to stop hitting. It's not what you do in that moment. In that moment, **nothing** you do, after they've already hit, nothing you do will teach them not to hit. I guarantee you. There's no way you can intervene afterwards. You know what happens when you intervene afterwards with

consequences? They hit each other again. It's happened for seven years.

So you could go ahead and intervene in a different way.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And actually, we have several questions about siblings where we're going to talk about how to intervene in a different way with them at the moment. But if you've read my sibling book, you already know that. If you haven't... Have you read the sibling book, by the way, Parent?

Parent:

No, not yet.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I highly recommend, since you have kids hitting each other, that you do read it, because I think it will really help. But when you read the sibling book, what you're going to find out is that, in the moment, if you intervene with consequences and the child feels shamed and blamed and not understood, there will be **more** hitting of the other sibling. I guarantee it.

Whereas, if you intervene by first helping the child who's been hit, and ignoring the other child, the perpetrator, until you are settled, not them, you. Until you can be in a more positive place when you approach them.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then, you use the heightened emotions of the moment, of that child who did the hitting, you basically empathize with them so they began to share what was so terrible that made them hit their sibling. And **if** they feel understood, they will, at that point, share it with you. And that's where you turn things around.

Once they get to talk about how unfair everything is to them, and how it wasn't their fault, they had to hit their sibling for this very important reason, et cetera. Of course, it's ridiculous. We know hitting is not okay.

But they need to share with you all those feelings. And if you can just validate the feelings until they feel understood and they're basically collapsed in your arms and making a warm connection with you, if you can do that, I guarantee you that you're on the way to solving the hitting, that it will begin to stop.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Now, they still have an issue with self-regulation and it might take... This has been seven or eight years of this, it may take more than one heart-to-heart like this.

And of course, after that heart-to-heart, when they're feeling better, then you say, "So, you know, buddy, hitting your sibling is never okay. Right? Yeah. Because it hurts. Right? Yeah. So when you did that, I think you hurt your brother's feelings, and you hurt his body. You hurt his heart and his body, and you know he really... " I mean if it's the big one, "He really looks up to you, you're the big brother." Or if it's a little one, "You know, your brother tries to be such a good big brother to you, and you really hurt him when you hit," you can say to the five-year-old.

And at that point, if you've actually done the listening and your child has felt understood, your child **will** respond by wanting to do a repair and make things better. And again, at that point, you've just begun to turn the corner where the hitting will begin to diminish. I've seen it happen in hundreds and hundreds of families. So I know you're saying in theory, but in practice, this is how it works. You've already been doing in practice what happens with consequences. It doesn't work.

Parent:

Great. Thank you.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay, you're very welcome.

Question 13:

Dr. Laura Markham: 00:58:57 This parent is saying that she has been using this technique for her 14-year-old for many years and is really happy to now have words for it to be able to talk to her partner about it because she has found it so effective. So, that's wonderful.

Dr. Laura Markham: So this is now a blended family with your partner and you have a new child together, a one-year-old, which is great. Congratulations!

And your partner's 12-year-old who has now been in your life for two years, spends weekends with you and also time in the summer. You feel he's often angry and often mean with your 14-year-old, and you don't really know what to do, because you don't have the same connection with him as a parent would have. And you don't think he's getting his emotional needs met by his dad, so he lashes out at your daughter. And you don't want to be overly corrective with him, but you need to protect your daughter.

Dr. Laura Markham: Yes, your daughter is your daughter. She doesn't have another parent living there with her. She needs to be protected. That's your first priority. Protect your daughter, by all means. You're right. Follow your instincts.

But that doesn't mean you have to be mean to this other kid. I mean, if they were both yours and he was mean to her, you would step in and say, "Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. Words like that can really hurt. Honey, you don't need to talk to her that way. Are you mad at something she did? If so, you can tell her what you need or what you're upset about without attacking her." Right?

So you're coaching him to act appropriately toward her. You also can coach your 14-year-old, who probably has some emotional intelligence because she's been raised more with this kind of an approach, and you can say,

"Wow, those are some hurtful words. Sweetheart, that could really hurt your feelings. I see the look on your face. You know, you can tell your stepbrother when things he says like that bother you." And she can say, "Don't talk to me that way." So you're teaching her to stand up for herself too, so she's not a victim and she knows she has somebody on her side.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Now, does any of that really solve your 12-year-old stepson's problem? No. I think his father has to meet the child's needs. So you're in a unique position. Luckily, you're married to the father of this 12-year-old and you can say to him, "You know, I think your son's really angry. I think he's really unhappy. He's a wonderful boy, but he's not getting what he needs. And you know, I think he's jealous of my 14-year-old who gets to live with you. And I think he's jealous of the one-year-old. And it's not good for them when he's mean and angry, but it's especially not good for him. And let's talk about how we can make sure, since you only see him every weekend, how you can make sure that he gets his needs met."

Dr. Laura Markham:

And also remember, his dad has got to be the one to step in also when he is being mean to the 14-year-old. Dad has to be able to learn this language and start to use it with the son so that the son feels cared about, instead of simply corrected, and can start acting in a more appropriate way.

Question 14:

Parent:

01:01:53

My question is that my middle child -- we have three girls - and my middle child is pretty resentful of her little sister. Her little sister is... it sounds awkward to say, but she's really a beautiful child and so... We're a tri-racial family, black, Mexican and Italian, and they all look different, but the little one, everywhere we go, people comment on her

and they ask to touch her hair, and we've even had people want to take pictures with her.

Parent:

We just have noticed a lot of resentment from our middle child who's also kind of more the introverted one, I would say. And so, just things that she does in the way she treats her little sister. And her little sister adores her big sisters, both of them. We really want them to have a beautiful relationship as sisters, and we're trying to figure out how to help, I guess, this situation because it is hard. Everywhere we go people are always gravitating towards the little one and how beautiful she is, and how pretty her hair is, and just, "Can we touch her hair?" And all these things. And I know it makes it very difficult for our older two, but it seems like more so the middle child, our middle daughter.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Wow. Well that's heartbreaking. What should be a source of joy, the beauty of a child, ends up being a source of pain for the other two sisters. And it isn't because of anything that you're doing in the family. It's because that's the way our society is set up, that we respond to certain things, and if they're seen as attractive, that's what people respond to.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Yeah, I am so sorry. I'm so sorry that everyone in your family has to go through that, first of all. Secondly, can't you do something about that child's hair? Like cut it off or something? No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. The whole thing is just so ridiculous, right?

I think that you want to help your middle child -- and your older one too, of course -- see her unique beauty, because she has it too. And it may not be physical. It may be a different kind of beauty. It may be her shining nature. You said she's more of an introvert. It might be her sensitivity and her awareness of the natural world, let's say, whatever it is.

I would really pay some attention to the gifts that your other two children have. Not that your third child doesn't need attention to her unique gifts too, beyond her... She's going to have her own issues that are connected to everybody falling at your feet because you're beautiful. It makes you think you're only valuable for that and that you're not smart and you're not ... You don't have other gifts. And once you get past a certain age, you're valueless. But she's going to have later in her life to deal with all that, your youngest, and that's not your question and we're not going to do that right now.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So your middle one and your older one, I would have discussions with them alone, not in front of the baby, and you didn't say how old they are and it probably doesn't really even matter, but I would have discussions with them alone about their, I wouldn't even mention, at least to begin with in those discussions, their sister. I would talk about the things you've noticed about them and how much you admire X, Y, and Z about them. How great they are in these different ways, how amazing they are, how these great gifts they have are things they can continue to develop. And whether it's athletic ability, or musical ability or as I say, the natural world, the ability to draw animals to you or to make things grow, whatever it is that they have, I would really affirm and nurture those things about them.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I would talk about how everyone has unique gifts, and sometimes those gifts are easy to see on the surface, and sometimes they're not. I'm betting that your middle child will bring up her sister, "Yeah, everybody loves her." And you can say, "That must feel so terrible to you." Any time you see her respond that way, I would say, "That must feel really bad to you how people make such a big deal over your sister without really even noticing you. And it must make you feel so overlooked, and yet you're so beautiful also."

And she might say, "I'm not beautiful like that. Everybody knows it. Everybody sees it," and you can say, "Yes, but they don't see your beauty. She's beautiful in a conventional sense that people notice, but they don't see the beauty inside you. But I do and I think as you get older it's going to be more and more obvious." So I would speak to that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

In that moment when people come over to you and say, you know, "Oh look at the little one. Oh, can we touch her hair?" I would find ways to shut that down before it even gets close, if you can. Off the top of my head, I don't know what, but I would say things like, "No. Thank you. Thank you. We're so lucky to have three beautiful children. Thank you. We'd like a little privacy." Just really shut it down, and also affirm aloud that you have **three** beautiful children, not one. And when people want to touch her, I mean -- she's not public property. I did have the experience with my daughter who had long curly blonde hair when we went to Italy of people wanting to touch her hair because it was out of the culture. It was different than the culture. So I think there's something about the exoticness maybe of a child who is Mexican, Italian, black who looks more exotic and in our culture, maybe that's part of it, but I still think that she should not feel like public property, that people can't paw at her, no matter how old she is. Is that helpful?

Parent:

Yes. No, that is so helpful. Especially the part of responding saying, "Yes, we have three beautiful children," and affirming that I think that's important. I also think, like you said, being able to, for the middle daughter just reiterate a lot that we see the beautiful gifts that she has, and we see the beauty in her.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Yes.

Parent:

And I think that's really important.

Dr. Laura Markham: And just the part about the girls' relationship, I think they will work this out over the years, but for now if she is mean to her sister, I would nip that in the bud. I would just say, "Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. No matter how you're feeling in this house, you can express what you need or want from your sister without attacking her," you know, period. And that we are kind, that's our number one rule. Not okay to be mean to your sister.

Dr. Laura Markham: If you're doing special time with her and roughhousing and playing games with her that she takes the lead on, that well all help her to work out some of the feelings that she's stuffed about not being good enough because of this unique situation she's in.

Question 15:

Parent: 01:09:11 So I have three boys and their ages range from four to 11 and I'm trying to implement everything with each of them, although at times I feel like for instance, when the older two come home from school that everybody is vying for my attention all at once. Some days I count how many seconds go by before each one says, "Mom, mom, mom," like they're all asking me for something. I think that my older two boys feel that perhaps I give in to their little brother a little bit when he is asking them for something that they have, and he is a curious four year old who looks up to his brothers and wants to see what they might be playing with or doing. And sometimes I guess it's my fault. I ask them to oblige only because I want to avoid a tantrum that particular moment.

Dr. Laura Markham: So first of all, you know that you are doing that, right? Because if you were one of your older boys, how would you feel towards the four year old when mom always makes you give up something just so he won't cry?

- Parent: Yeah, resentful.
- Dr. Laura Markham: Resentful. Would you want to be close to your little brother? Would you want to protect him or might you want to tease him and be mean to him?
- Parent: Yeah, be mean to him.
- Dr. Laura Markham: Yeah. Exactly. So we think we're maintaining peace in our home, but we're actually perpetuating undercurrents of resentment, that then ends up ... You can't have an undercurrent of resentment without having that take shape in your home between the people in your home.
- So you think you're trying to make it easy on you -- you know, Oh God, I can't deal with this four year old melting down again, understandably, we all feel that way -- But then you ask the older kid to give in and he does. And what have you just created for the future? Like a lengthening shadow into the future of their entire relationship. And obviously one time doesn't do that, but if you do it on a repeated basis, yeah.
- And you can see these boys talking when your four year old is 40 to his older brothers and the older brother is saying, "Yeah, mom always loved you best. Yeah, she didn't really care about us."
- Parent: Right.
- Dr. Laura Markham: Now obviously that's not true. You adore your older kids. But you can see that they would have that attitude, that they weren't as cared for. So how terrible would it be if you coached your boys, if you used -- have you read the information on sharing that's in *The Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings* book, and it's also on the website?
- Parent: The sibling book, no, I am intending to read that next.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay, good. You haven't read it yet. Okay. I would say go to the website and look up Sharing, because there is information on sharing. There's more in the book but there's also info on the website on sharing, and I would first of all read that.

And then secondly when your four year old wants something that the older boys have, coach him. He should not be the victim here who needs mom to interfere on his behalf. He needs to be a real person. He's a four year old.

He can do this, he'll need your support. He'll need your coaching. But he can say to his older brother, with your support, and you can say to him, "It seems like you really want a turn with that. Can you ask your brother when he'll be done with it?" And you need a rule in your house about, he can't say, I'll be done with it at Christmas, he's got to say, I'll be done with it at lunch time or dinner time or whatever your family rule is. It can be the next meal or it could be the next day, but with a four year old it probably should be the next meal because he can't wait that long.

Dr. Laura Markham:

He can ask. And then he's going to have a meltdown. You're totally right. When his brother says dinner time and then he'll be like, "Well, but I can't do it at dinner time. Then it's going to be dinner and then I have to go to sleep and then I can do it until tomorrow," and he's going to have a meltdown.

And you're going to hold him and say, "I know, it's so hard to wait for what you want." But remember, if you're just giving him what he wants, that's rewarding entitlement. There's zero reason to do that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Whereas if he's crying about something he wants with your full compassionate attention, he's actually crying out old hurts about how it feels to have two big brothers who are so much more competent and brilliant -- because it will

seem that way to him, because he's littler -- and always in charge, and they always get what they want and he doesn't get what he wants.

He'll be able to cry about all that stuff, and you know what's amazing? Let's say this all happens at three. At five o'clock before dinner when the older kid has forgotten about whatever the thing was and put it down, you'll see your four year old doesn't even want it anymore because he got a chance to cry about all those feelings, and his brother doesn't have it. He doesn't even need it anymore.

So I think it is completely worth it to do this approach to sharing because your kids get all the right messages. They learn that just because they cry, they don't get something, it doesn't mean they get it. And that you do get what you want sooner or later, but sometimes you have to wait. That is all about delayed gratification, and when kids have that experience and then they learn they get it, a bunch of things happen inside their neural development that are really good for them. One is about delayed gratification.

Another is about generosity. They learn that they really did get that thing and they can wait and someone gave it to them and they're grateful to the person who gave it to them. And in fact, if the big brother does give it to him, even at five o'clock, and four year old looks at big brother with his big eyes and says, "Oh, thank you," both kids get a little hit of neurotransmitters that increase the likelihood that they'll be generous people to each other and to other people in the future.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So it really develops what we would call character, a set of skills for life. And it does not develop the character at all when you make the big boys give him something. Does that all makes sense?

Parent:

It makes all sense, yes. And I have been implementing things that you say, like finding compassion and

recognizing his feelings and things like that when he does have a tantrum. And I've found that they (the tantrums) don't last as long. I sit with him in my arms, I let him cry, I acknowledge his feelings and I think it's been helping a lot.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Good for you. Good for you. I know it's not easy to do that, and you're doing it. Good for you. Yay.

Question 16:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:15:41

A parent is asking, "My oldest, who is six, says he doesn't like or love my middle boy, who is four. He won't play with him. And the little one who is 22 months also won't play with the middle one. So my middle one gets angry and sad and aggressive.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Well of course. Oh my goodness, your poor four year old to feel like his brother is shutting him out all the time. So one thing is, I know you can't control how your six year old feels, but you do need to help him with those feelings before he ruins his brother's life. Really. So you can help your six year old. This idea that he doesn't like his brother is completely what we've talked about earlier in this call about siblings not liking the second child. You can help him work through those feelings so that he can deal with his brother. This is all in my sibling book, and also you can deal with it all by preventive maintenance.

You also can control the family culture. You need a rule about inclusion. Like, in our family we're kind to each other and everyone is allowed to play. And when they're unkind or exclude, just directly interrupt that, it can't be allowed to happen.

Also there are ideas in my book about the three way dynamics, there's a whole little section on when two kids

gang up on a third one or exclude the third one. Take a look at that section. It's just a short section.

And also look at how to strengthen the bonds between your kids. So the 22 month old is going to follow the lead of the six year old, but I would also urge you to find times when the six year old goes off on a playdate, or maybe goes off for special time with the other parent, if you have another partner. And then you stay with the four year old and the 22 month old, and you facilitate them having a great time with each other in whatever way, like a special activity they can do.

Dr. Laura Markham:

It's very important when you have more than two children, that they get one on one time, each of them with each other, like special time, rather than always hanging out as a group.

And if there are two kids who don't naturally connect, you create opportunities. You take them on special outings or find activities they can do at home as a pair. The more it's just the two of them, the more likely they are to bond.

I think this is something you really need to do some work on. And again, if you're working on this and you've read the sibling book and you're not getting traction, get some help from a parenting coach so you can actually make this work. Because don't wait. Your kid is six, he needs to turn this around now so he doesn't carry this the rest of his life. And your four year old is the one who will actually suffer from it.

Question 17:

Parent:	01:18:21	I have three boys and my 10 year old boy is constantly criticizing his younger brother. We're doing lots of empathy to help with his connection. He is constantly
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criticizing, he picks at him for everything, which we find very difficult. It does trigger both my husband and I, and also he's always trying to be the parent of his younger brother. Even when we're present and taking care of things, he still feels like he has to take control and be the parent and tells his brother what he should and shouldn't be doing. I think it got worse when we started peaceful parenting. It has decreased a little bit, but it's still quite a big issue for us.

Dr. Laura Markham: So it sounds like he's a little bit parent-ified. It sounds like he thinks he needs to be in charge.

Dr. Laura Markham: But I want to address your other question, which is, well, things got worse when you started peaceful parenting. I think what happened is you stopped punishing and your kids started misbehaving more. And you know connection is how you're going to help your kids **want** to behave themselves. I know you know that and you're working on it. But when did you actually start peaceful parenting? Just with this course?

Parent: Just a little bit before the course. We read the book and we tried to implement it, so probably about eight weeks.

Dr. Laura Markham: Okay, so you're two months in. So you probably are seeing bigger changes in your four year old than you are in your eight or 10 year old, is that correct?

Parent: Yes, it's working very well with the four year old.

Dr. Laura Markham: Exactly. So eight weeks in with a four year old is great. Eight weeks in with an eight or 10 year old, it can take a lot longer with an eight or 10 year old. So here's what I would advise you to do with your big boys, and I would include all your boys in this, but sit all your kids down and say, "Look, you know how we used to yell at you and give you a consequence when you broke the rules?" You've

mentioned you've known that your boys have noticed that you're not doing this anymore.

Dr. Laura Markham:

"We're sorry that we got into the habit of yelling at you so much and just using consequences to deal with things when you broke the rules. We think that there are better ways for you to learn, actually. We don't think anybody deserves to get yelled at no matter what. And we're working really hard to use respectful voices."

"But you know, kids, we do have all the same rules we always had. It's never okay to lie. It's never okay to hit your brothers or hurt their feelings. It's just that we think you're going to learn more from cleaning up your own messes and repairing your mistakes than from being punished for them."

"So from now on, here's what's going to happen in our family. We're going to talk about the ways we want to live together as a family. We're going to come up with what our ground rules are, our family rules. We're going to agree on those. We're going to agree on what happens if you break those rules. And here's the bottom line, when you damage something, including a relationship with someone in our family, we're going to expect you to make a repair to what you've broken or damaged. When you make a mess, we expect you to clean up your own messes. So let's begin by having a family meeting about why household rules are important to us."

And then the kinds of rules that I would recommend, people often ask me, what kinds of rules do you recommend? So I'm just going to quickly go through these rules. These are examples of rules for say your kids who are four to 10. "Be kind". This is always my first rule, be kind, you can add a sub rule to this, it's not really a sub rule but just a clarification, which is "Say what you need without hurting words or actions." This is the most important thing we're always trying to demonstrate in our

own behavior, and to remind our children to do. You can tell your brother what you need without hurting him, without attacking him, without mean words, without hurting his feelings. So be kind is the first one.

Dr. Laura Markham:

“Cooperate with parents”, always on the list. “Clean up our own messes”, and that's the whole concept of repair. So you could have a sub rule there or an explanation for it, which is repair when you damage anything, including a relationship. Here's one that I didn't use but I ended up adding because a lot of families have an issue with it. So I don't know that you really need six rules. I tried to keep it to five, but some families feel strongly that they need this rule, “Ask to use each other's things and each person decides when their turn is over.” So that packs a whole lot into that. It's about sharing. I'm not going to go into that now. There's a lot of information in my sibling book on sharing and there's also information on the website, but basically each person decides when their turn is over, as an important part of that, and asking to use each other's things is obviously important.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The next one I think is really important, and I think it's worth lots of discussion with your kids. “Act with integrity”. Kids don't know what integrity is and most parents never talk about it with children. But integrity means -- and this can be your sub explanation -- that means we're honest, we treat everyone fairly and we do what we say we're going to do. So that enforces if you have an agreement about how to use technology in your family, if you have an agreement about being on time, that was one of the things you mentioned. Then this covers that.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And then the final thing that I think is great for all families is, “We're family”. We might get mad, but we always make things with each other better. So some version of we're family and we show up for each other.

So this is something you might even need more than one family meeting to do. I wouldn't try to hammer out all of your technology rules in the same meeting. That would be a separate meeting.

But I would do your basic ground rules first, your family rules. Write up the agreement, have everyone sign it, even your four year old, even if it's an X. And also you could say, "Well, what happens if somebody forgets the rule? What do we do then?" Your kids will probably be really draconian. What they're going to say is something like, "Well then they should be punished. No screen time." Then maybe ask, "Do you think that's the best way for somebody to learn to ask to use each other's things or to clean up their own messes? Is there some way that the person could do a repair instead?" I think that's the general framing here. It's not just slapping them with consequences, i.e. punishment.

Dr. Laura Markham:

If the frame is how can they take responsibility for what they've done and make it better, that actually in the end develops responsible kids so much faster. And some simple answers to your questions. If they lie, they have to make a repair, they have to earn back your trust. If they come home late, they have to prove to you they can be responsible about coming home on time or they can't go places. Is that a punishment? No, it's sort of like if you're in the sandbox and and you throw sand, you can't be in the sandbox. If you can't come home on time, you can't go to Bobby's house.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So it's not that there can't be structure around these things, and ramifications if you're late, it's that you're not slapping them on kids as a punishment. This is partly in your attitude, and partly it's that it wasn't discussed up front. Partly it's that they don't have the ability to -- they're not being empowered to make it better by demonstrating that they actually can handle something properly, for instance.

And your last question about hitting, clearly they have to make a repair if they hit their brother. But also it's a red flag for you that there's something wrong for that kid if your kids are hitting each other, and especially your oldest who is 10 and certainly of an age where he doesn't need to do that.

Dr. Laura Markham: So, I know I just said a lot. Does that help? Does that clarify a little bit how you can deal with the fact that you no longer just have consequences?

Parent: Yes, yes it does. With regards to the limits, we set the limits and we already do quite a few things like that anyway. They know how to behave at home and all of those things, but what if they just don't do it? If you set the limit, you get them to do the repair and they continue to do that same behavior, what would you do then?

Dr. Laura Markham: So it depends on what it is, but should we use technology as an example?

Parent: Yep, that's fine.

Dr. Laura Markham: Okay, because that's very common. So technology is an addiction. So I would look at the facts. Remember, when your child doesn't do what you want them to do, you're always increasing the amount of support you're giving them so that they can meet your expectations.

Dr. Laura Markham: So that's the model of empathy and limits as opposed to the model of punishment. The model of punishment would say, "I'm going to keep increasing the punishment until they do what I want," which is how you create lying and sneaking around and defiance, and sometimes compliance, which is sometimes even worse. So instead we're using empathic limits, which is you increase the empathy part, the support continuum, for your kids.

So what kind of support would a kid need to turn off the screen at the end of their screen time and stop playing their game? Because you're busy washing the four year old's hair and you can't go tell him to turn off his game. Well maybe he needs more support than you're giving him. Maybe it takes more than a timer, because in fact technology is addictive.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So maybe you need to put it in that context and say, "You know what, I'm seeing you are not able to keep our agreement. Our family rule is that if you don't handle the technology responsibly, you boys came up with this, and we've all agreed that if you don't handle it responsibly and turn it off at the end of your time, then there's no technology for a week. But I've seen that you're still going over your time and you're not able to handle it responsibly.

So I think it's just too hard. I think it's too hard for you to use it. And the only way we can let you use the technology and have the screen time is when a grown up can be there at that time to help you turn it off, because it's so hard to do. So we're going to have to add to this that you can only do the screen time at a time when a grownup agrees that they'll be there 20 minutes at the end of your screen time."

Dr. Laura Markham:

And your kid is going to say, "No mom, that's so unfair." And you're going to say, "I hear you, it really feels awful to have to have that kind of a restriction. But Honey, that's because you're not able to do it by yourself. It was just too hard for you to do. We can try it one more time today and see if you're able to do it, but if not, then we're going to have to come up with a solution that works. And I don't know a better one unless you've got one."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So I think you're really, you're really looking at it in terms of support, but it's not that you're not enforcing your limit.

Does that make sense? You're always working to enforce your limit.

Parent: And do you see the children see that as support rather than punishment, if you do it like that?

Dr. Laura Markham: I think it probably depends on a lot of factors. The most important of which is your voice at the time.

Parent: Okay.

Dr. Laura Markham: So if your voice at the time is, "Oh Sweetie, I know. I wish there was another way around this. I'm not sure what that way is, but it's really not working this way. So do you have a good idea about what you could do?"

Really what you're trying to do is help your son develop self-discipline. In this particular instance, you're saying, "I know you want to keep playing the game, but your agreement with us is to turn off the game. It's really, really, really, really, really hard to do. Most adults would have a hard time doing it." You say all this, and there's got to be something he wants more than to keep playing. So why would he turn off the game? There has to be something he wants more than to keep playing. And what he wants more is that relationship with you. So partly it depends on the relationship you've developed with him. This is why connection is so important.

But in that moment, as you talk about it, you can forgive him for having a loud and upset reaction to this. Of course he's going to have that reaction. And you can say, "I know it feels awful," Right? "but I don't see a better way because I'm not seeing what else we can do together that's going to work. What ideas do you have?"

So when he sees you partnering with him and he gets that you're doing this out of your own integrity as his parent, you're not causing him pain on purpose. You're working

for something more important here, which you're working together on doing. I think that they won't always like the decisions we make and they may protest them and be very unhappy about them, but I think they end up giving us the benefit of the doubt, especially when we're able to stay calm in those discussions even when they get upset.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I just want to say don't give up. It's harder with a 10 year old, but it's going to work. It really is. Everyone wants the love and understanding you're giving him, it really will work. Don't give up.

Parent:

Thank you.

Question 18:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:31:32

This parent's question is, "I often get upset with my children because of the cascade of thoughts that happens when they've done something wrong. It almost always boils down to the fact that I'm angry with myself because I obviously haven't been a good enough mom or I would have taught them this or they wouldn't be doing that. How can I reframe my thinking so that I can take responsibility as a parent but not get triggered by failure feelings?"

Dr. Laura Markham:

Okay. It's true that if we were perfect parents, our children would behave better, but they would still not be perfect because they're not. They're small humans, just like us. They're still learning, also. So, you chose to have five children. You added the fifth while your youngest is still a baby, so you're choosing the benefits of a big family and you're explicitly making the choice to give up some other things. One of those things is time, another is quiet, another is money, all these things that are in short supply in bigger families, but another thing you give up is any fantasy of perfection.

Some of the rest of us with only one or two kids can hang on to that fantasy a little longer. But the truth is eventually it fails for all of us. No parent can be perfect and always in a good mood, but a parent in a large family has to juggle many more needs, much more stress, and therefore has to become even more self forgiving. So you're doing the right work.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So yes, you might've taught them better if you had fewer children to teach, but you chose something else. You chose to give them their own family pack, and that's a different kind of a gift. It's a good gift. The way you take responsibility as a parent, but don't get triggered by failure feelings, is the practice of forgiveness and acceptance.

Accept that your children need to do things wrong. That's how they learn. Accept that they're teaching you and you're growing too. That's how you learn. Accept that what goes wrong is an opportunity to stretch your heart, to grow more, to love more, to forgive yourself, to forgive your kids. I know that stretching your heart is one of your goals or you wouldn't have had five children. So right now accept your kids, right now in advance, for being humans who are still learning and aren't perfect. And forgive yourself in advance for the same thing.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Give yourself mantras to use every time you start to get triggered by your own perfectionism. Like, "We are all enough exactly as we are," or, "I haven't taught my children this yet. It takes a long time to learn. We're still working on this. We just don't know it **yet.**"

And then, "Thank you. We are all learning all the time. Thank you for this lesson in how to love. Thank you for stretching our hearts," because that's the goal, not being perfect.

Question 19:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:34:03

A parent asks, how do you do that with four kids? I would say with humor and courage, just like you have to do everything else with four kids. I don't have four kids. I didn't have the courage to make the decision to have four kids. You did, so I know you have more courage than I do, and I think that's how you handle four kids.

You're like a really good preschool teacher who is able to have her arm around one kid, be talking to a second kid, be looking over up from the second kid for just a moment over her head to the third kid saying, "Oh, oh, oh. No, no Johnny. No. That's dangerous. Stop." You're dealing with more than one child at once.

It's not just fragmenting your attention, it's shifting your attention quickly, but being wholeheartedly present in each moment. So in the moment when you make contact with Johnny, you're all there, even though your arm is around Greta and maybe because you were just talking to Michael you put your other arm out to him as you had to look away from him for a minute. So your full attention is to each child in the moment, who you're interacting with, and then back around to your circle again. And it's not easy. It's not easy.

I do think that when you have a lot of kids and you're trying to do anything, it really helps to have had special time with them before that so they just don't need you as much.

Question 20:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:35:41

Our next question is from a parent who has a 23-year-old, a 21-year-old, a 12-year-old and a 10-year-old, and is a

single mom. The problem she says is that, “The two younger ones see what their older sisters do and try to follow those rules, and the older kids don't see how their behavior affects their younger siblings. What can I do to keep my house in harmony? There's constant fighting about what they should or shouldn't do.”

The answer is you're the grownup. I know it's hard to be a single mom, especially of four kids, but you're the grownup. If your 23-year-old and your 21-year-old want to live with you, which I think is wonderful, they are certainly old enough to have a discussion about how their behavior affects the younger ones, and to take some responsibility for enforcing house rules and caring for the younger ones. There is no question that a 12-year-old does not get to do what a 21-year-old does. “I know you wish you could do what your sister does. When you're 21 you can move out if you want or you can live with me if you want, and you can stay up all night if you want because you'll be on your own. But right now you're 12 and it's time for bed.”

Dr. Laura Markham:

That's the attitude you take. So there should be zero fighting. Sure, they can lobby, they can try to convince you that they should have the same privileges as their sister. But that's ridiculous. Of course, a 12-year-old doesn't get the same privileges or the same responsibilities as a 21-year-old.

So those are the discussions I would have, and I would start by having discussions with the older ones separately, and then maybe the younger ones separately, and then maybe all four girls together. I think you need a family meeting and you need to start creating a culture of cooperation. Now my book, *Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings*, talks about how to create that family culture. It's not geared for kids as old as yours. It's geared for kids 12 and under. But I still think that family meetings and the other things I talk about, about how to build sibling bonding, in the book could be of great use for you.

And I do think that most of the work, is going to be inside your own head. You stepping up, taking responsibility as the parent, as the grownup and making the rules. And that doesn't mean you don't listen to your 12 and 10 year old. And it doesn't mean you don't listen to your older kids too, but you shouldn't have so many rules for them. If they're choosing to live with you, then you negotiate the rules and what your agreement is and you negotiate their obligations, but you're the one who's the grownup no matter what and the mom and you take that responsibility.

Dr. Laura Markham:

I think if you can work through whatever's keeping you from doing that, you'll find that your girls will...they may challenge you still, but they'll get clarity about where your limits are. And if this is hard for you to do, which I totally understand it may be, then I would suggest you have a few sessions with a parenting coach just to support you and get some clarity, so that you feel comfortable being the authority in your home.

Question 21:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:38:52

Our next question is from a parent who says, "The peaceful parenting and methods you describe really make sense. However, I have four children and when there are two children who need my help, I often take care of the smaller ones. explaining the situation to the older kid, and go afterwards to the older kid. But this is always hard for the older kid as well, even if he or she understands."

So you're describing exactly the hardest thing about having more than one child and you have four, so you're right. Even a 10 year old can really feel like maybe you prefer the other child or they're unimportant, when you go to the four year old or the six year old or the eight year old first. That is true. And when you have more than one

child, you're signing on for the inability to be there at all times for each child when they need you. And yes, that's a problem, because responsive parenting -- in other words, responding when they need you -- is the most important thing for children's wellbeing.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But I don't think that means that we should only have one child. Right? I think that kids, if you're responsive most of the time to them, they can share you with another child. Sometimes. They can handle the delay when you go to another child first. Sometimes. And they can even handle a lack of responsiveness on your part at times because of your own needs, like you're sick or you're half asleep or whatever.

So even though responsiveness is the most important thing, as long as the kids' needs are usually met, they can handle not having their needs met. Sometimes. After all, humans have been having more than one child for a long time now. And most people come out okay.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And of course there's no difference whether you're peacefully parenting or conventionally parenting in the fact that you can't always be there when a child needs you. The difference in peaceful parenting is we become aware of how important it is to be responsive. That doesn't mean hovering. It doesn't mean we're always focusing on the child. But it does mean that when they need us, we try to show up for them. That's the difference in peaceful parenting.

So what this parent is asking is, "Okay, you made me aware that I need to show up for them, but how can I possibly do that when I have four children?" And you're right, you cannot always do that. There is an article on the Aha! Parenting website that is called "How to Help Each Child With Big Emotions."

<https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/siblings/big-emotions-with-multiple-upset-children>

Dr. Laura Markham:

And it does walk you through this. So I suggest you read it, but basically what you're doing is you're speaking to both children. So you're trying to take both kids in your arms, one in each arm. Or if you need to go to one child over the other, you might say to your 10 year old, "Oh, I hear you need me Sweetheart. I will be there very soon. I'm just helping your sister with her owie." Or " She's having a hard time, too. I'm going to take care of her for a minute and then I'll be there with you." And there's a lot more, I should say, in that article that should be very helpful to you. B

But I want to add one thing. I wouldn't say to always go to the younger child first. Sometimes your four year old or six year old is less upset than your eight or 10 year old, and you'll choose to go to them and your four and six year old can learn that, too. They don't have to learn that they always get preferential treatment. You can say to them, "Oh, you really need me, don't you? I will help you with that in just a minute. Right now I'm helping your sister." In other words, you go by the magnitude of the need as far as you can tell at that moment, rather than the age of the child. That way your oldest kids get that they're important to you also and their needs don't always come second.

Question 22:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:42:38

Our next question is from a parent who says, "Our oldest daughter, seven, loves to be the leader or controlling the rules of play with the four year old girl and five year old boy siblings. When they don't follow her, she erupts in rage. She also feels that she's not loved as much, that they always steal her stuff, quote unquote, that no one listens to her. And this leads to explosions usually in the form of yelling, name-calling at her siblings, and sometimes violent

hitting at mom. We've tried special time and setting empathic limits, but that's not working. Help."

Dr. Laura Markham:

Well, first of all, it's great you're doing special time, and that will help her to heal the feeling that no one listens to her. The definition of special time is that it's all about that child. So she does feel listened to.

And setting empathic limits is of course essential because she's not allowed to call names at are siblings.

However, you're completely right that while this will increase her sense of safety and feeling understood, it's not sufficient to work out that chip on her shoulder that she feels about her siblings. She's probably never gotten over them being born and she feels that they get something she doesn't get. They take things from her, right? That's making her very upset.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So this is what I call the chip on the shoulder, and in our sibling week, I talk a lot about how to heal that. So I'm betting that maybe you're a little behind on the course and you haven't yet heard that sibling week yet. So I think that will really help you. But the short version is, she does need to cry and to show you all that pain that she's been storing up for the last three years since her brother was born. So to allow her to cry, you need to do roughhousing to get her laughing and move her toward a point where she feels comfortable to cry.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So those times when the violent hitting happens, absolutely stop her from hitting and recognize, speak to the rage and speak to what's under it. What you'll be saying to her is something like, "It must be so hard to be the big sister. To have the other kids take your stuff when you don't want them to." And then she'll say, "They take my stuff, they steal it!" And you'll say, "I hear you. It's not fair the way they take your stuff, is it?"

Dr. Laura Markham:

The more you acknowledge her experience -- you don't have to agree with her -- but the more you acknowledge what she's experiencing, the less she'll need to hit because she'll be able to articulate it, and she'll feel safe articulating it to you. That begins to melt the chip on the shoulder because she feels understood.

Right now you may be empathizing as you set a limit of how she doesn't want to share something or how they took her things and she's upset, but I think at that moment when she's really enraged is how you'll melt the rage. She'll feel heard.

Question 23:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:45:41

Here's a question about responding quickly and effectively in a positive way when three kids have different needs. Does this sound familiar? There are five-and-a-half-year old twins and a two-and-a-half-year-old. So it's hard enough when they all need attention at the same time, but it's even harder when something gets difficult. It's hard to say, "Wow, you really wanted that popsicle." It takes a lot more self-regulation than to say, "That's it, I'm throwing all the popsicles in the trash!" And it's more likely to happen that way if all three of them at once are all over the parents. It's hard not to snap at one, two or even three of them.

Dr. Laura Markham:

But this is really a self-regulation question more than a sibling question, and self-regulation is always harder when you have more than one child. I can't tell you the number of times a parent has said to me, "I was so calm when I had one child. Then when I had two, things got a lot harder and I started to lose my temper a lot."

And you not only had two, you had them at the same time. Twins. Twins are notoriously difficult. They are. Because

you have two babies at once. One baby is hard enough and two babies, it's impossible for one person to meet their needs. It just is. So they're always pitted against each other. And the fact that they mostly play well together is a testament to your parenting and their personalities. How wonderful!

But you add a two year old to the mix -- and of course two year olds are notoriously difficult -- So you have twins plus a two year old. That's going to be hard for anybody, right?

Okay. So I'm about to give you a magic wand to make it easier to calm your children down when they're all fighting over the same popsicle or they're all upset at once. Ready for your magic wand? It's your own wellbeing and self-regulation. If you can take care of **you** to maintain a higher sense of wellbeing and monitor it throughout your day, you will feel better and have more inner resources on which to draw.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And if you really work at your own self-regulation, in that moment -- in that moment, this is the important thing -- you might remember to Stop, Drop and Breathe. So the minute you start to snap at somebody, say to yourself, "They're only children. It's my job to be the role model." And then instead of saying, "That's it, I'm throwing all the popsicles in the trash," you're more likely to be able to say, "Oh no, this feels like an emergency. It's not an emergency, we'll figure it out. 'You really wanted that Popsicle, didn't you?'"

So what you're doing is transitioning between the sense of emergency your children have -- that's what's affecting you, right? Your children have a sense of emergency. Your magic wand to change that feeling that is causing your kids to act out and get upset with each other and with you at that moment -- they're threatened, they think it's an emergency -- Your magic wand is that you know it's not an emergency and you can calm yourself down.

So in that moment, here's the transition. "Oh no. Once again, things are getting out of hand. I can't believe this. I can't take this. Why can't they just..." Right? Those feelings are on your part. The minute you start to notice that negative cycle starting, you Stop, Drop those negative thoughts like a hot potato, and take a deep Breath.

Then you transition from that sense of emergency and you model for your kids how to do it. Just what I said a minute ago. "Oh no, this feels like an emergency." And your kid is saying, "It **is** an emergency. She took the color I wanted!" And then you make the transition, where you say, "We can figure it out. It's not an emergency."

And your calmness, your emotional generosity, your sense of humor in that situation is what allows your children to calm down. And it's also what allows you to empathize. "Wow, you really wanted that popsicle." So the work is inside you, not the kids.

And it's such helpful work, not only because it will make those interactions easier, but you're modeling a life skill for your kids that will help them for the rest of their lives and even not so long from now.

If you start doing this, I guarantee you that in three months you'll hear one of your twins say it to the other one, and you'll see all your kids calming down faster, reassuring each other, and able to work things out with each other better than they do now. Not to mention, this is a skill that will help you in your relationship with your partner and in your relationships with colleagues. It's a really important life skill -- and how wonderful that your children are helping you develop it!

Question 24:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:50:51

This is from a parent who says, "When my kids, six and three, start fighting, one hits and the other screams. That

causes the baby 11 months to cry. I can usually talk it through and empathize and one kid will calm down and feel bad and try to fix the hurt, but the other will still be upset and won't accept the fix. Then the baby is still crying."

Dr. Laura Markham:

So yes, you're describing the hard thing that happens in families when you've got more than one child. It's hard enough when kids fight, but when you add a baby to the mix, it can feel impossible to cope with three kids at once. The great news here is that you're doing well enough using empathy that at least one of your kids is talked down and trying to help the situation. The other good news is that you actually have a lot of influence with the baby. The baby's only crying because the hurt child was screaming. And once that's stopped, if you can stay calm and reassuring, then the baby will calm down.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Of course, you're still left with one child who's still upset and won't accept your fix. The reason is that that kid feels wronged, and I'm betting that even though you're using empathy, that child is still feeling pressured to fix their inconvenient feelings. They don't yet feel like they've been heard and justice has been done, and they're not really willing to take the fix that's being offered by their sibling.

So at this point, you need to take your empathy one step further. You may need to sit down on the floor reassuring and holding the baby while you talk with the other two. Slow the process down and really listen and empathize and walk them through the problem solving process that's outlined in my sibling book, *Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings*.

Dr. Laura Markham:

Remember, until they feel heard, they're not going to calm down and work things out with each other. You'll have to do some version of this over and over and over again. But as you do it, your children will begin to learn the skills. They'll pick them up, they'll begin to use the skills

themselves, and then you won't get to this point so often. And even when you do, your children will often work it through with much less effort and involvement from you. And that's a good thing, because soon the little one will start to have fights with the three year old and your older kids will have the skills to work out those disagreements without so much help from you!

Question 25:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:53:09

This parent says, "I have three children ages seven, five and two and I'm trying for a fourth. Crazy. I know."

Yes. I just want to say I personally would not do that. But I understand that for some people, parenting is at the center of your life and you feel that you are more patient than I am and you can pull it together and be that patient parent for four kids. I couldn't do that. That's why I stopped at two. But if you can, power to you. We need more children who've been parented this way in the world, so that's great.

But to parent peacefully three or more children, you're asking what are the tips to do that? Top tips and action steps to be able to do it all with more children. Honestly? You can't. I don't understand how anybody can really do preventive maintenance with four children. You can't do it every day. You can't do roughhousing everyday with four children. You can, you can do it with them together, but depends on their ages.

You can't do one-on-one connection time, special time every day with four children, unless you have help, another adult or something. I would just say, the preventive maintenance tools, I have never seen them fail. They always work. And if you have four children, they will still work.

Dr. Laura Markham:

The question is, finding the time for self care for you so you can make them work, and finding the time for one-on-one time with the kids, again, so that you're actually putting the tools into practice. And that's the reason it doesn't work with more kids. It isn't that you couldn't do it. It's the rule of the 24 hour day, which in this time/space continuum, I have no magic wand to give you for it. I would just say the best answer I could give you is, it's not always about how much time you spend, it's about how deeply you connect.

So if you have a moment of very deep connection with your child, of looking into their eyes, of loving them fully, that moment can be more strengthening for your relationship with that child and for their self esteem, than spending a half an hour special time later in the day. But of course, it's hard to find that moment and it's hard to show up and be fully present if you have a baby crying for you at the same time, and the two other kids are in an argument, and dinner is burning, and you didn't get any me time today to sit down and meditate, or go for a run, or whatever else. So I want to acknowledge how tough it is, but I want to say, I still think that kids raised with peaceful parenting are going to do better, even if there are four or five kids in the family, than kids raised with conventional parenting.

And I also think that if you start off this way, kids, by the time they're seven are so nurturing to younger children that you'll have help. So I know you have a seven old, and I don't know how long you've been doing this kind of parenting, but it might be that your seven-year-old and your five-year-old are already great at parenting.

My daughter, who's four years younger than her big brother, looked at a bunch of old family videos. She was editing them for me, and she said she realized something. She had three parents. She watched all these videos of the first five years of her life, when her brother was ages four

Dr. Laura Markham:

to nine during those videos. And she said, "What I saw over and over again was a mom, a dad, and a big brother who acted a lot like a parent."

And she said that's what shaped her relationship with him, where it had pluses and minuses honestly, where sometimes she felt like he didn't take her seriously as an equal. But now that they're older and she's 21 and he's 25, and of course he does (now). But she realized that it was why they didn't fight, because she always felt like he was taking care of her.

So if you raise kids this way, you'll find the older ones are very nurturing to the younger ones, and there's so much less sibling rivalry. So, that's really the best answer I can give you about peaceful parenting with lots of kids.

But I would say if your heart's desire is to have five kids, four kids, whatever, be my guest. If that's what makes your heart sing, do it. But every time, before you get pregnant, please double-check that that's still your desire. Don't just go based on your old aspiration, number one.

And number two, I would stretch it out between your children as long as you can, because the longer you wait between children, the more the other children have their needs met already and the less demanding they're going to be from you, and the more you're going to have to give, really, to each child.

Question 26:

Dr. Laura Markham: 01:58:07

This parent is saying that they have a three-year-old and an 18-month-old and they both really want more children, but her husband works 50 plus hours a week and they're both exhausted with two kids, and they don't have a lot of

outside support. So what do I recommend, she's asking, for adapting peaceful parenting to big families?

Dr. Laura Markham:

Well, peaceful parenting is simply regulating yourself, connecting with your child and coaching each child to bring out the best in them instead of punishing or using rewards to control the child's behavior. So when you're coaching, you're doing emotion coaching. So I never recommend adapting it. I recommend doing it whether you have a small family or a big family. I think you can absolutely use the peaceful parenting approach when you have a big family.

There are things that you might do differently. For instance, I would be a big fan, if you have a big family, of letting your children take more responsibility at home. That means that as they get to be school-aged, maybe they make their own lunches in the morning. Maybe they make their own breakfast, in fact. And you're just the cheerful camp director helping solve the problems when they get an egg shell in the egg as they crack it, or when one kid knocks over the other kid's juice. So there's certainly things like that that are time-saving practices that are wonderful for big families, that parents who have small families might not even think to try. But I don't think that's peaceful parenting or not peaceful parenting.

So peaceful parenting, which is about connection, you would still do. You're not going to not connect with your child just because you have more children. It's going to take extra time with more children, but of course you're still going to do it because that connection is what children thrive on. That connection is what helps them cooperate. That connection is what reduces sibling rivalry when children have to share you. You're not going to stint on connection.

So the real thing with larger families is you know you're going to have to say no to other things. There's 24 hours in

a day. You're probably not going to work outside the home if you have more children. If you're the mom and you have a partner who's working 50 plus hours. And in fact, I would argue that probably your partner needs to work 40 hours, not 50 plus hours, right?

Dr. Laura Markham:

So there are things that you change, that you give up in other areas of your life that you're just not doing. You're probably not going to have a beautiful garden and front yard because you just don't have enough hours in the day.

Now I agree with you that it's harder when you have more kids. There are simply fewer moments to connect with each child, right? And so it is true that you're already making the trade off to be able to put less connection time basically into each child in order to have more children.

And you know, I understand wanting to have a big family. I love children. I would have been thrilled to have 10 different children who I would've been able to nurture as they grew up. I would have loved to have done that, but I was aware that it would mean that I wouldn't have enough to give to each child. So at some point there's a trade off, right? Where you're not able to give each child enough if you have more children.

I guess each parent has to have an honest conversation with themselves and see where that line is.

And part of that complicated question is about how close to space your children. I am not a big fan of spacing children only 18 months apart. The research shows that it's better to space them further apart. It's better for your health, your energy level, and also your child's wellbeing. I, in fact, chose to space my kids four years apart and I've always been very happy with that because it meant that I was able to be a really good mom to each one of them. But I realize that sometimes parents are older and they don't have that opportunity to space their kids that way.

Or maybe there's an accident of fate and life and fertility and their kids come 10 months apart and that's a blessing.

Dr. Laura Markham:

It's a blessing no matter when your children come, but it's going to be harder for you if they're spaced closer together. So you already have a three year old and an 18 month old. They're pretty close together, and you're saying that your 18 month old is restless and that you're already exhausted. So I would not think about having another child soon. I would definitely want to wait until your three-year-old is a little older and your 18-month-old is not a baby anymore. I think that would be better for your kids. That's my bias.

And I understand that you're not getting any younger and you're feeling in a hurry to have more children, but you say you're already exhausted and you say that your husband works 50 plus hours. So I'm wondering, would it be actually good for your 18 month old and your three year old for you to have another baby in nine months, let's say? That doesn't seem like a great idea to me if you're already having a really hard time. As you know, pregnancy is exhausting, so it's not just a matter of, oh, when the baby comes, you'll be exhausted. You're already exhausted. Being pregnant you'd be more exhausted, and then there'd be another baby. To whose advantage is that?

So I love the idea of a big family. I think there are many advantages to big families. But only when the kids are spaced out. When they're too close together, I don't see why it would benefit the other children. You know?

It's okay for parents to want more children because that's what we want, but I don't think you want to compromise your children's experience of you parenting them by becoming an exhausted, grouchy, short tempered parent. Really.

Dr. Laura Markham:

So you don't say you're grouchy, you don't say you're short tempered. I'm just imagining what exhausted looks like. And maybe you can do this if you figured out a way to get more outside support or if you figured out a way to have your partner work only 40 hours a week instead of 50 plus, and if you weren't also working part time, which you say you do. Maybe there's another way to do this. But I guess I would just ask you before you have another child to really be honest with yourself about how that's going to affect your parenting. Because it isn't a gift to your children if you don't give them the best of yourself.

Dr. Laura Markham:

And that's all our questions for today. Thank you for listening and I hope this was helpful. If you still have a burning question that wasn't answered on this audio, please submit it for possible inclusion on my podcast. Just go to ahaparenting.com/podcasts, so A-H-A parenting.com forward slash podcast, and leave your question as a voice memo. This is Dr. Laura Markham wishing you less drama and more love. Goodbye for now.