

## A conversation between Dr. Laura Markham and Heather Shumaker, author of [It's Okay Not to Share](#)

**Dr. Laura:** Hello. This is Dr. Laura Markham, the author of "[Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life.](#)" I'm delighted that you're joining us today. My blog tour stop today is with Heather Shumaker. She's the author of one of my very favorite books on parenting, which is called "[It's OK Not to Share and Other Renegade Rules.](#)" Heather, thank you for joining me today.

**Heather:** It's great to be able to chat about these topics. I was so excited to hear that you have a new book coming out focusing on siblings – "Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings" – because people have been asking me, "Can you tell more about siblings?" I said, "Other people will talk about siblings." But really, all of our topics overlap so much. I was wondering what drove you to write this book as your next book.

**Dr. Laura:** I guess it's just that I get so many questions from parents. Every talk I've ever given, every conversation with a parent who has more than one child, we talk about parenting in general a little bit and then immediately the issues come up about their kids getting along with each other.

**Heather:** Why do you think this is such a big issue for families? The sibling relationship and dealing with conflict that comes up just by living together.

**Dr. Laura:** I think part of it is just what you just said, Heather. When we live with other human beings, conflict is bound to be part of those relationships. It's a part of every human relationship. Most of us weren't really taught when we were young how to work those conflicts out in a productive way. By productive, I just mean a way that respects the other person and also gets our own needs met.

I think as parents, we're confused. We so often give our children these mixed messages. I was talking to one mom recently. She'd been reading books with her son about sharing and being kind, and part of one book was about letting someone else go ahead of you in line.

Her lovely little four-year-old was in line at gymnastics. His parents were watching from the sidelines, and they noticed he was letting everybody else go ahead of him in line. These other kids had been through that station already once, and he'd never had one turn on that ramp. All these other kids were going ahead of him, and it was because he was trying to be kind.

Afterwards his dad talked with him about it and said, "What are you going to do next time? Are you going to let people go ahead of you?" The kid's just trying to be a good kid. He doesn't know. I just think we give kids so many mixed messages about what's the right way to be in relationship with other people.

**Heather:** We do, and sometimes it's when the parents themselves are feeling tired and we don't act our best. I think that also when it comes to siblings, as adults we have varying views on what a normal sibling relationship is.

I think in your book you used the word sibling fights and conflict interchangeably, meaning that we will have conflict with other people that we live with. A lot of people, I think, will think of a fight as a mean or physical thing.

To me, siblings fighting is not inevitable but sibling conflict is. The conflict, to me, is really about two different ideas bumping up against each other. One human has one idea; another human has another idea. When they have different ideas, that's a conflict. It doesn't mean that there's necessarily people slugging each other, but it does mean that there are different ideas coming up in the world. How do we deal with that?

**Dr. Laura:** Yes. That's a great way of framing it because so often parents worry when their children have conflict. I think often what ends up happening is that we try to smooth things over and let's just all get along and push the conflict under the rug.

When we do that, we're not teaching kids how to work things out, and so the conflicts will flare up and actually get worse. There's more likely to be sibling hitting as opposed to if kids are allowed to disagree and then given the tools, if we can coach them, to work things out with each other.

**Heather:** I think really it is giving kids tools and giving ourselves tools. I think since a lot of parents did not grow up with a method that they want to follow themselves or maybe there were a lot of sibling fights between their brothers and sisters, they want to find a new way but they don't know how so they're looking for these tools.

**That's what I like about your book. You actually are giving people the tools, which are really the basics about how to control their own emotions so that they can help kids deal with their**

**emotions and give them tools to go through conflict steps and figure out what to do when we have two different ideas.** What can we do here?

**Dr. Laura:** What you just said is so important to me. Maybe my anthem is about regulating ourselves. So many parenting books have such good ideas about “this is how you coach your kid to do X, Y, Z.” But if we’re not regulating our own emotions, we can’t do that and we’re not modeling that for our kids.

We might say to our kids, “Okay, here’s what you say when you want a turn on the slide.” But then if, when emotions get hot we start yelling, that’s what our kid’s going to do when he wants a turn on the slide. He’s going to push somebody out of the way or yell at them.

You’re so right that it starts with regulating ourselves.

**Heather:** That can be big work. It’s not easy to do. We can’t dismiss that. It takes a lot of effort to regulate all the time, but that’s what we’re signing up for when we’re signing up to be parents.

**Dr. Laura:** And we don’t know that! I don’t know whether you knew it when you had your kids. I certainly didn’t know that was what I was signing up for -- personal growth and learning to regulate my own emotions.

**Heather:** I had a different background because my mother taught at this preschool that I describe in my book and, one thing, I have a curious memory. I probably was about five years old, and I was sobbing my heart out. I don’t remember what about but I was extremely sad.

I remember getting tears and snot all over her shoulder and feeling guilty that I was making it all wet. I was thinking, “Wow, it must be really hard to be a mother or a father who has to put up with a really wet, sad, loud child.”

I remember having this distinct memory that someday when I get old enough to be a parent, I’ll have to develop that amount of patience to cope with a kid that is as sad as I am right now because boy am I really sad. That’s just a nugget of information that I remember thinking as I was screaming as a small child.

I packed that away and later when I was an adult, I was surprised to realize I really had developed that patience. I don’t know where that thought came from, but some of us were blessed to realize what we were in for. Some of it is a total shock when the kids give us all their huge, big emotions and we really don’t know what to do with it.

**Dr. Laura:** Right, and we’re asked to grow. Parents so often tell me, “I was a great, calm, easygoing person before I had children, and look what happened to me. I scream all the time.”

Part of it is that children actually push our buttons in ways that we don't get triggered the rest of the time.

As we talk about siblings or as we talk about teaching kids to get along, I wonder how much of that is even possible without our first getting ourselves regulated. You'll hear your child speak to their sibling in your words and your tone of voice.

**Heather:** Yes. I think it helps to practice on other people's children. The neighbor's kids or if you're a teacher working in a daycare or preschool, because you don't have such an emotional tug that your own kid can push your buttons more than somebody else's can. We tend to be calmer dealing with somebody else's child.

I think for someone who is struggling with how to stay calm if you have an opportunity to practice on someone else's child, then you can see it's really not so personal. It's really not about you. They're really just trying to deal with their own emotions, so try not to take it personally what's happening right now. Then maybe get that perspective to do that when your own kids are throwing big emotions at you.

**Dr. Laura:** Yes. That's such a great point. It makes it a lot easier to remember not to take it personally. With our own kids, of course, it feels personal, but it really isn't. It really isn't about us. It's about them!

When we talk about helping kids with their emotions, I call it emotion coaching. You do a lot of that in your book where you actually help kids find the words to express their emotions. I love when you do that because I think you make the point in your book that saying "use your words" is not enough. You can't just say to a kid "use your words" when a kid is upset. What words is he supposed to use?

**Heather:** Right, and it's all about teaching the kids how to set a boundary. Usually the conflict, at least with the younger kids, is someone's taking a toy or somebody's pushing them or someone's knocking over a little village they just built. There's something often physical involved.

For them to be able to say, "I don't like that," and say exactly what they don't like – "Don't knock over my tower" or "I didn't like it when you pushed me" – to be able to articulate exactly what the wrong is and what they didn't like and to tell the right person, not to tell mom, dad, whoever, but to tell the child, that is to talk peer-to-peer.

That's such a hard thing because we as adults tend to sidestep that conflict and like to go tell our best friend instead of the person that we're actually having a disagreement with.

**Dr. Laura:** I never thought of that – we do that ourselves as parents!

**Heather:** The more we can do it with kids, we're actually training ourselves to cope with our own conflicts and disagreements face-to-face, too.

**Dr. Laura:** Heather, that's such a great point. I have a section in my sibling book on tattling and how to handle it, and I think our approach is very similar. But I never thought about the fact that adults model "tattling." So often, adults don't go to the person in question and instead complain to someone else.

We even complain to our children rather than going to the source. "If your dad had only filled up the car with gas, we wouldn't be late." Right? I never thought of that as modeling tattling. What a great point. Oh, my goodness.

What do you say if a child comes to you and says, "So-and-so threw sand at me in the sandbox"?

**Heather:** I've done this with other people's kids as well as my own. If you're in a public park and a child comes up to you and says, "Your kid did this," I say, "It sounds like you didn't like that. Let's go talk to him or her."

Then I say, "Would you like me to come with you and help you talk to him?" or, "I'll make sure that she listens to you when you tell her what you didn't like." I give them moral support, especially for a child who may not be used to this, because the kids who come up to me, strangers that are used to running to an adult for the slightest trouble, they're the ones that I really want to coach in this because they're probably not getting it at home.

If they come up to me and say, "Your son did this to me," I'll say, "It sounds like you didn't like that. Let's go tell him. I'll be there while you talk to him. I'll make sure he listens." Their eyes usually get big because they're not used to that response.

**Dr. Laura:** Right. They often think you're supposed to go yell at the kid. They'll say, "Aren't you going to get him in trouble?"

**Heather:** But then I think they actually feel safer afterwards because after the conversation, "I didn't like this, don't pull on my leg when I'm on the slide," whatever the issue is, and the child says, "I won't do that anymore," their problem is solved. They feel a guarantee of safety, and they're willing to get on with their play and maybe, hopefully, they've learned a little bit about how to deal with that problem next time.

**Dr. Laura:** Also, when you say they've learned how to deal with it next time, I really do think there's a real step into their own power. You're empowering kids to know that they can handle themselves in a situation. They don't have to rush right into being angry when somebody takes their toy, for instance. They can actually use their words. That is how they feel able to begin

using words because they're not quite as threatened. They do have some power in the situation.

**Heather:** They have control, and it feels great to have control and not be just wildly going through life. When you know that you have tools to draw on, and life feels a lot safer and better.

**Dr. Laura:** Yes, absolutely.

**Heather:** I like how your book goes into two sections, depending on what stage the family is when they're reading the book. A lot of times the sibling issues come out when a new baby or a new child arrives in the family, but then there's always something in the book for people who stumble on the book later when they've already got some sibling issues going on.

I love the new baby stuff because in our family when the second one came along, it took three years before the older one accepted or expressed any interest. There was a lot of antipathy towards the baby. Just did not like the new baby, no interest at all.

I was confident that someday they would get on, at least respect each other, but I didn't assume that they would ever be friends because face it, different people, just because they're in the same family, doesn't mean that they're going to really get on and be best buddies.

But after three years, I must admit, my trust was beginning to wear thin because I thought, "Are they ever going to like each other?" Then once the younger one got out of that baby blob stage where they just had very different interests and abilities than an older child, it was amazing to see a true friendship and deep love develop.

I think sometimes it takes a lot longer than we're comfortable with. We want to see that love, the family love that we have for each of our kids, just be instant for the siblings, but it takes time to develop the relationship. To be honest, babies aren't very interesting for many kids.

**Dr. Laura:** Yes, unfortunately, it's true. Heather, I'm so glad to hear you say this because I so often hear from parents this exact worry about whether their kids will eventually get along. They feel helpless. When this was going on and your oldest clearly did not feel much affection for the baby, was he actually physically acting out toward the baby?

**Heather:** I would protect the baby from any kind of assault. There wasn't much of that going on. But there were things like gluing his valentine upside down. "I'm gluing the valentine upside down because I don't like him. He's the one I hate in the family."

**Dr. Laura:** Oh, my goodness.

**Heather:** Just comments and very, very clear. I said, “Wow, sounds as if you don’t really like your brother right now.”

**Dr. Laura:** Good for you.

**Heather:** I would acknowledge that’s the emotion, but I also gave him the benefit of the doubt that he might feel different another time. I didn’t contradict him but I just said, “Right now this is how you’re feeling. I can see that the heart, the valentine heart is upside down.”

Then at a certain age, once the baby was a toddler and could understand a lot of language, I said, “You can still feel that way, but now your little brother can understand your words and that could hurt his feelings. If you want to say that, let’s write it down or go say it in another room where he can’t hear you.” He could still have the feeling, but he couldn’t hurt his brother by saying things like “I hate you” to him.

**Dr. Laura:** During that time when your little one was now old enough to understand it, did you see some indications that they were starting to find common ground or did it really take a lot longer than that still?

**Heather:** It took a long time, and I think it’s that personalities are different. Some adults don’t find babies interesting; some adore them. There are people who are really good with kids, but they just don’t like the young ages.

I think that was the case with our older child. He just wasn’t that interested in what a baby or a toddler could share with the world. He wanted somebody who could talk and play and do the things that he was interested in. Until that moment when the younger sibling developed enough to be a worthy playmate, there was zero interest.

**Dr. Laura:** If you were talking to parents who were in the same situation, most parents would ask you right now, “But what did you do with all of those times when your older one was being mean in some other way? You’re not there hovering over them, you’re doing the dishes or whatever, and the older one decides to take the little one’s toy or whatever?” That happens even when there’s not a lot of animosity, right?

**Heather:** Yes. If I’m not there at all (because I do believe in allowing some out of eyesight but within earshot type of supervision) then I wouldn’t see it and what would happen would happen. But if I was right there, I would probably make an observation and say, “It looks like you’re taking the train,” or whatever it is, and see what happens....

Because babies also do give and take. A lot of their games are offering and then giving it back, and they’re not necessarily upset. In some ways, they think of this as interaction. The younger sibling tends to be fascinated by the older ones. The fact that an older child takes something

from them is not necessarily the end of the world. If they were engaged in it and they really wanted it, for instance, if the younger one squawks and cries and reaches, I might interpret that and say, "Wow, he's crying right when you took that toy. It looks like he wasn't done with it."

It's more of translation and helping both children develop empathetic feelings. Even if they're not emotionally ready to act on them independently all the time, for them to just keep hearing those messages so that they begin to be aware this is another human being. They have big feelings, too, and we're all part of a family. My mom and dad are not taking sides; nobody likes one better than the other.

**Dr. Laura:** Right. They're not taking sides and making you give up something and deciding when your turn is over. It reminds me of one of the comments that I got that I put into my book, which is "Jacob, I'm not done with that yet. Can I have it back, please?" This was a four-year-old talking to the two-year-old.

That kind of an exchange is remarkably sophisticated, but if we model that from the time they're little, kids are actually able to learn that kind of language. As you said, they're not always able to act on it, at least initially, and it does take repeating it over and over and over.

**Heather:** We sometimes think, "I taught you that yesterday, you shouldn't be doing that now."

**Dr. Laura:** Yes, exactly.

**Heather:** We just want it to be easier, but it does take patience and it takes trust that these methods will work and that it will sink in. I think what's important is that it sinks in to the deepest part of the kid's soul and that also it really does get deep inside of them and it comes out when they need it, especially the older they get.

When they become parents themselves, I'm a case in point. I model a lot of the language that my mother used with me and my brother does, too. I think we model it because we believed it was fair and effective.

**Dr. Laura:** You remember your mother doing this as children, when you were a kid?

**Heather:** More with me because he was the older one, so she practiced on him as a guinea pig. She discovered the School for Young Children where she learned a lot of her parenting skills from the teachers there, watching how they interacted with the kids.

By the time I came along, she had more tools to use that were more effective. I got more benefit, and he had to be the guinea pig. But that's natural for parents because, as you say, we all grow. We're not natural-born parents. We have to figure it out.

**Dr. Laura:** True, but I am thinking, “Wow, this next generation of children that we’re all raising are going to be a lot more like Heather Shumaker.” That would be fantastic. What a great world we’d live in if kids grow up to be more like you!

It is an amazing idea that we could give an entire generation of kids so much more to work with so that they could express their needs to other people in a way that is respectful of the other person and still gets their needs met.

**Heather:** In a way, you’re raising your grandchildren and then your great-grandchildren, because if things work and people feel it was good, they will repeat it.

From the parent point of view, too, it’s so much more relaxing. I had actually never held a baby in my life until I had my own, but I had worked with young kids a lot. Starting around age two, I felt very comfortable working with kids, no matter if they were having a temper tantrum or not. It was easy and comfortable.

It wasn’t always pleasant, but I felt on stable ground because I knew what to do with a child who is feeling out of control because I’d seen it modeled all of my life. I think once you have these skills as an adult, you get self-regulated and you get calm because all of a sudden you’re not feeling out of control because you know how to handle this. It makes it a lot more relaxing to parent.

**Dr. Laura:** I love talking to you about emotion because I think so many parents, when they were young, their emotions were really not allowed. Many parents I speak with get very upset when their child cries because it was treated as an emergency because when they cried when they were little. In fact, it was an emergency -- they could get yelled at, they could get hit, for crying.

You’re the exact right person to ask this question of. Often parents, when I talk about allowing kids to have their emotions, they wonder, “Isn’t there such a thing as too much crying? Aren’t we raising drama queens if we do this?” I love that you remember being five and crying. How would you answer that?

**Heather:** To be honest, I think I was a little bit of a drama queen. I had very big emotions and I was allowed to have them, so I sometimes wallowed a bit and continued to have them.

But what my mother would do, because she knew that my emotion had been accepted, if after a while she was tired of the noise or just thought that I could keep crying if I wanted to but she was done listening to it, she would just tell me, “Sounds like you still need to cry. I’m going to be in the kitchen because I need to do these things” or “I’m going to be out in the garden” or whatever she had to do.

“You can be in your room with the door closed; you can be in the living room.” She gave me certain places that I could be that I could continue to have that loud emotion. She was done but she would tell me where she was, so if I needed her I could come find her, if I didn’t want to be alone. It wasn’t a banishment, but it was, “If you still need to make these noises, you can do them here. It’s a safe place, and if you need to find me, this is where I’ll be.”

**Dr. Laura:** How did that feel?

**Heather:** I wanted to cry a long time. It felt fine. I timed myself once and I remember I was old enough to tell time so, I don’t know, maybe I was seven. I timed myself, and I did cry for two hours once. I was interested to see if I could get that far; I was watching the clock.

Sometimes kids have all kinds of bizarre ideas that they’re just doing on their own, and it may have nothing to do with the parent or the emotion. If it’s a day when you’re not out and about and that’s convenient, they can be in their room and make noises.

Children have all kinds of reasons and they’re not always fully understandable to adults, and that’s okay. It’s meeting the need of the child for some reason, and if you can find a place where they can continue to have that emotion, it’s probably not hurting anybody.

**Dr. Laura:** Right. I love that. I also want to just say again for the record what you said to start, which is your mother had accepted your feelings initially. It wasn’t like you got upset and she said, “Okay, be upset. I’m leaving.” It was that she said, “Oh, really? You’re upset about that. Oh, tell me about it.” Then after a while, she had enough and she couldn’t really listen anymore. I think that’s completely fine for us to draw our boundary and say, “Okay, this is as much of this as I can do.”

**Heather:** Right. She didn’t yell and say, “Ah, that’s enough. Stop crying.” Sometimes when we talk about limit setting, we forget that adults and parents – that includes mothers and fathers – have rights, as well. We need to remember our rights because otherwise if we don’t set boundaries that make us comfortable, also, then we are just drained by the end of the day. We have a right to live our day in a reasonable state of comfort.

**Dr. Laura:** That’s a really good point because I think sometimes parents get overwhelmed by the idea of having to really be there with kids’ feelings because it can be very hard for us.

I would love to talk more about the idea of interpretation. You used the word, “I would interpret that,” and I do the same thing. I say that you’re becoming an interpreter. So presumably both of your children know English if you’re reading this book in English, but they can’t actually hear each other and understand each other well sometimes when they’re little.

What we can do as parents to facilitate that communication is to be their interpreter. "I hear your brother saying the sand hurts him. Can you stop throwing the sand at him?"

Can you tell us more about what you mean by interpretation?

**Heather:** Sometimes it's actually looking at a child's face or a facial expression or body language and pointing that out, interpreting that for the other child. Kids are still gaining the skill to read facial expressions, and for some kids this is a real challenge. Some kids, it comes easily and naturally, and some it can take years to develop that skill.

To point out, "Wow, look at Joey's face. It looks to me like he's scared. Joey, is there something you don't like? Is there something that's worrying you?" Saying out loud something that seems obvious to you instead of jumping in and just deciding it. The more we can say something out loud, that gets the other kids in the room attention to look and say, "Hmm, that's what that face looks like. Oh, I wonder if it's something I did." It just gets that process started. That's one way to interpret is to interpret body language.

**Dr. Laura:** Yes. That's such a great point. It's not just all about the words. Also, I would add I know you're not talking about just kids who are verbal. With kids who are nonverbal, who are younger, we can start to give both children the language by doing exactly what you just described. Right?

**Heather:** Right, because the younger ones don't have that language. Parents can discern if that's a scream that's tired or it's a scream that means I want my lollipop back or whatever. We can say, "It sounds like they're worried or they want something back or I know that he's ready for his nap." We can interpret some of the noises that come out. You know what? Kids will correct us if we're wrong.

**Dr. Laura:** Right, good point. They do.

**Heather:** The verbal ones will, and even the nonverbal. They'll continue to point or whatever they need to do to get their message across. If we're wrong about our interpretation, if they care about it, they will correct us.

**Dr. Laura:** So often interpretation helps us to head off bigger battles. You mentioned fighting, hitting each other. That doesn't have to happen if we help kids say what they want in words, earlier. That kind of hitting happens when they feel helpless. That's how they're solving a problem. We may not think it's a good way to solve a problem, but that's what they're doing.

**Heather:** I know that you're a big proponent of roughhousing and I am, too. The kind of hitting that I prefer to see is playful roughhousing-type matches, where kids think of that as how you have physical play with each other. That way, if there's a conflict, they don't immediately strike

out with their fists or feet... they actually reserve the kind of playful punches and rolling around stuff for when they're having a game with their siblings.

**Dr. Laura:** This is such a great point because many parents get worried about roughhousing, and they'll say to me, "I just don't like them to roughhouse... Somebody always gets hurt." I think some kids do sometimes get hurt roughhousing, but I think there are ways that we can help kids to agree on rules and that we can make roughhousing work for kids.

Actually, you describe this in your book, "It's OK Not to Share." Tell us about what you would do with two kids who are roughhousing if you were worried.

**Heather:** If I was worried?

**Dr. Laura:** Or if one of them does get hurt.

**Heather:** Usually, you have to make sure that both kids are having fun. You can just ask. "Is this fun for both of you?" If it's fun for one sibling but not the other, then it's a conflict; it's not a game. Just ask the question, "Is it fun for both of you?" Maybe it started out fun, but things have shifted. "Is this still fun for both of you?"

Then if it's a game, then helping them set boundaries on each other such as don't pull my shirt or whatever it is that they want, to set a rule, helping the other one listen to that rule and making sure that it's upheld. Otherwise, roughhousing is a great way for siblings to bond.

I don't know if you heard this, Laura, but I've heard somewhere that the key to long-lived, healthy sibling relationships is that the positive experiences outweigh the negative ones. Kids growing up will have the good times and bad times, but if they have more memories that are positive with each other, then overall as adults and older kids, they will have a good, solid relationship. But if the negative ones dominate their memories, then they'll have a bad one.

Roughhousing is a great way. My memories as a child roughhousing, which often included my brother and my dad, were just highlights. Huge joy and just togetherness, the physical touch combined with the laughter, is such a good social bonding tool, and that's why mammals do it.

**Dr. Laura:** That's true. All mammals do it, don't they? The young mammals do it.

**Heather:** Yep, and parent mammals do it with their babies.

**Dr. Laura:** That is a wonderful note to wrap up on...what a beautiful vision. That image that you have from your own childhood of sheer joy and connection from the laughter and the physical touch, what a wonderful image for all of us to hold for our children to grow up with.

Thank you, Heather. I've been talking today to Heather Shumaker. Heather, would you tell people how to find you online and how to find your book?

**Heather:** Find me online at my website: [heathershumaker.com](http://heathershumaker.com). The book is there and anywhere else books are sold, "[It's OK Not to Share](#)." Your new book is "Peaceful Parent, Happy Sibling," coming up soon.

**Dr. Laura:** Yes, it is. "[Peaceful Parent, Happy Sibling](#)." I also have another book: "[Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids](#)" is my first book. That's a more general parenting book.

Heather, thank you so much again for joining me today. It was wonderful to stop by on my virtual tour to be able to see you today.

**Heather:** Glad to have you. Thanks so much, Dr. Laura.

Thank you for joining us today!

And if you haven't yet pre-ordered [Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life](#), don't miss the SPECIAL OFFER, only valid for pre-orders: When you preorder, you get immediate access to my [Peaceful Parenting Audio Course](#). Just order [Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings](#) from any source, and [upload your receipt here](#).