

## Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids Online Course

### Week Eleven: Siblings

#### Transcript

Hello, and welcome to week 11 of the Peaceful Parent Happy Kids Online Course. This is Dr. Laura Markham and today we're talking about siblings -- How you can raise children who become friends for life. We'll be talking about what causes sibling rivalry and what reduces sibling rivalry.... how you can create a family culture of kindness and respect... how to intervene in a fight...how to handle hitting between siblings...an approach to sharing that minimizes conflict and teaches generosity...how to teach your children skills for peaceful conflict resolution and much more.

But I want to start by saying that the first year in your children's life together, when you welcome a new baby, is a pivotal moment in your children's relationship with each other. That's because it sets the tone for the future. It's also because so many parents don't know how to handle the older child's panic about the new baby. So the parents, who are exhausted and dealing with a new baby and having a hard time meeting everyone's needs, often inadvertently set up a situation in which the older child never gets the support they need to work out their upset about the new baby. And that can cause what I call a chip on the shoulder, which is just resentment toward the other child. So this first year is the source of many of the problems between siblings, and they can continue all through childhood and indeed all through life.

I know that most of you are not in that first year at this moment, so most of this audio will be giving you the tools you need to teach your kids how to navigate conflict peacefully. But because the first year is so important in setting the tone for the sibling relationship, I do want to say a few very brief things to those of you who do have a baby a year or younger in your house. I think those things will actually benefit all of you who are listening. Because I think as you reflect back, you'll be able to see some of the sources of your children's conflict today, even if you haven't really been able to make those connections before.

So just a few quick points for those of you who are welcoming a new baby. First, the most important thing to know is that your older child does not have the same perspective you do on the baby. It is not the answer to their dreams as it may be for you. In fact, they're likely to grieve. They're losing something of great value to them, their place in the family. And this is true even if there are other siblings in the family, if they're the child who's been the baby. And it may be true even if they're not the baby of the family, if they're the oldest child, because it's a repeat of a loss they felt when the second child was born. So any time there's a new baby in the family, your other child or children will feel displaced. They almost certainly will grieve and they may panic because they just don't know if they can get their needs met and their connection with you is suddenly very different.

So when your child goes through these feelings, your job is to connect with that child and to support them. That will allow the child to process the emotions instead of stuffing the feelings,

which is what creates that resentment, that chip on the shoulder. So don't wait until there's a problem to address the feelings and needs of your older child or children.

And while we're talking about needs, the second point is your older child may look huge next to the baby.... they will, even if your older child is only 18 months old. But your older child is still little. A mom said to me the other day that now that her youngest is eight, she realizes that when he was born and the oldest was eight, she thought he was a giant, practically a grownup and could handle anything by himself. She expected so much of him, but now that her youngest is eight she realizes how young her older child was when the baby was born and she can see how she could have supported him better.

So expect regression from your other children, they need babying too, not just the baby. Your children don't need you constantly but they do need to know that you will be there if they need you because otherwise if they think you won't be there for them, they will begin to resent the baby.

The third point if you're helping your child or children get used to a new baby, is that preventive maintenance is key. You already know how to do preventive maintenance from earlier in this course. One on one time -- special time -- is critical to help you maintain a strong relationship with your older child and have them feel you're still really there for them. As you know, special time and the other preventive maintenance tools also help your child work through their big feelings.

You can expect older sibs to have big feelings about the new baby and that means they need to laugh and they need to cry. So make sure you're using all the preventive maintenance tools, special time, laughter and roughhousing, empathy, and if you need to, scheduled meltdowns. Make it safe for your child to share those feelings with you. Allow all feelings, acknowledge all feelings, even when you need to limit behavior.

Remember emotions aren't dangerous, they only begin to dissipate when they're experienced. Your child won't feel safe experiencing their negative emotions unless you acknowledge and validate, and simply tell them it's okay to feel those things. That it's not unusual; all big brothers and sisters sometimes feel this way. They can always tell you how they feel and you always will understand and help them. Once we help big siblings with their emotions about the baby, those emotions begin to evaporate and then sibling affection has a chance to blossom.

00:06:20

So that's all the time we're going to spend on welcoming the new baby but I do want to encourage you to read my book *Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings*. The entire last third of the book is about how to get through that first year and how to build a foundation during that time for your children to become friends for life.

So now what if your children are a little older or maybe a lot older? The advice I just gave about allowing all feelings is actually really effective no matter how old your child is. But let's back up and start from the beginning.

What is sibling rivalry; what causes it? Well, obviously when the new baby first arrived you brought home a replacement, and as we've already discussed your child had a sense of loss. Maybe some self-esteem issues -- why did you need to get a newer younger model? And of course at any age, there's the problem of having to share your parents, which makes you wonder will they be there for me when I need them? Will my needs get met?

It's very hard to share your parents. Our genetics are from the Stone Age, because humans evolve very slowly. So for your child when he or she sees you with the baby on your lap, they're wondering, "Well if a tiger jumps out of the bushes, who is she going to save?" And I know that sounds ridiculous in our 21st century homes but on some level your child wants to make sure you're there and available to him, or he doesn't feel safe. That's why your child can be playing happily with their sibling and the minute you get on the phone, all of a sudden the kids start to act out. It's the same exact principle. They want to make sure they're safe and they want to reel you back into connection with them just in case they need you.

The research on sibling rivalry supports the idea that much sibling rivalry comes from the question of whether your needs will get met, whether you feel close to your parents, and whether you feel valued in the family. I say that because when children are of the same gender, there is more rivalry; there's more competition between the kids because they have sort of the same standing in the family. They're both your boys or they're both your girls. So it's very important that they each feel valued for their unique self. Also, research shows that spacing your children closer together does cause more fighting and sibling rivalry, presumably because children are competing more for the scarce resource of your time, and therefore of course there's more sibling rivalry.

But there is another source of sibling rivalry that every parent knows, and that's that immature humans who live together don't necessarily know how to resolve conflict in a productive way. If they both want the tow truck or they both want the remote control for the TV, there's often going to be a fight and young humans don't necessarily know how to stand up for what they need without attacking the other person. In fact many adults don't know that. So one of the sources of sibling rivalry is simply that it's hard to live with other people. Conflict is part of every human relationship and most of us weren't taught as children how to resolve conflict in a productive way. So it's hard for us to teach that to our own children. But in fact sibling rivalry is always worsened when children don't know good ways to get their own needs met and resolve conflict with their siblings. So we'll be talking a lot about that in this audio.

00:09:50

Now let's consider what helps sibling rivalry. What helps kids get along better and reduces those feelings of jealousy between siblings? The first important research finding is from Dr. Gene Brody who is one of the most respected sibling researchers in the United States today. He looked at a number of different studies and he said, "There's an impressive consensus of research findings indicating that higher levels of parent-child relationship positivity," -- in other words how connected are you with your child, how positive is that relationship -- those relationships are "linked with higher levels of positive emotions and pro-social behavior between siblings." Pro-

social just means that kids are nicer to each other, they look out for each other, they're kinder to each other and they work out conflict better.

Brody also found that negativity, intrusiveness and over-control in the *parent-child relationship* are associated with aggressive, self-protective behavior in the *sibling relationship*. So the more you yell at your child, the more you control instead of coaching -- that kind of negativity is associated with a negative sibling relationship.

So you can see this fits right in with peaceful parenting, both our big idea number two which is connection, and our big idea number three which is coaching instead of punishment. And really even our big idea number one, which is about self-regulation, because obviously you have to be able to regulate yourself to maintain a positive reaction when your child exhibits childish behavior -- which you can count on when you have children!

So all three of the big ideas in peaceful parenting are what are going to help you have a positive relationship with your children and that's the number one predictor of whether children will have a good sibling relationship.

Now, you might be thinking wait a minute, wait a minute, I've been working so hard to be a peaceful parent. I've really gotten down this self-regulation thing, I'm really coaching, I'm connecting so well with my children and we'll have special time and a wonderful time with each other and then they come out of special time and the next thing I know they're hitting each other. It's not only about my relationship with the kids, it can't be! I agree with you completely.

Even though a number of studies showed this, these studies usually include neurotypical kids. They usually did not include kids who had special challenges. There is other research -- many studies -- that show that if your child has special needs or is a high-needs kid or a super sensitive kid, that they're going to have a harder time when a new baby is born. They'll have a much harder time adjusting. And remember what I said at the beginning, that first year sets a tone for the entire sibling relationship. So if your child had a very hard time when the baby was born because of their own high needs -- which makes sense if you have high needs, that it would be harder to share your parents. If your child had a hard time with that, it could easily have settled into a kind of resentment of the sibling.

So it is not just about the parent, even though the research shows the parent has a lot of power. The sibling relationship will obviously depend on the temperaments of both kids. So if you have a child who has a hard time with affect regulation or impulse control, who has a little bit of delay in the development of the prefrontal cortex and thus tends to be a little explosive, you're going to have a child who has a harder time working things out with siblings. No matter what kind of parent you are, no matter how well you model emotional generosity and no matter how empathically you connect with your children. I just want to be clear that there's no blame here, but there is a lot of power. You do have a lot of power from the way you relate to each child to affect the sibling relationship.

Now, there is some other research that you should know about. When children have fun together they're more likely to have a positive sibling relationship. This is true even when kids are close

in age and tend to fight a lot. It's sort of like the magic ratio that makes a marriage work or helps your relationship with your child keep a positive emotional valance. The more positive interactions, the better the relationship will be between your children. So it's worth going out of your way to figure out the things that they enjoy doing together and setting up opportunities so that every single day they get a chance for some positive interactions.

And finally research also shows that sibling relationships are better when there's a family culture of kindness and respect. And of course, that tone is set by the parents. Again we're back to regulating our own emotions so that we can exhibit kindness and respect for each other (the parents) and also for the children, because we're setting the tone in the family. When we do that, what we find is that the children are more likely to learn those skills and ways of relating and even when kids are having a hard time with each other, if the parents have set an expectation of a family culture of kindness and respect for each other, the research shows the children are more likely to work things out in a positive way and they'll even cite the family rules. So they'll say to each other, "Our family rule is be kind; those aren't kind words. I don't like it when you talk to me that way." And they'll work things out with each other in a more productive way than simply calling each other names.

00:15:44

So you know now that what increases sibling rivalry is when kids have to compete for the scarce resource of your attention and connection, and worry about getting their needs met. When you have a challenging child who has more problems with self-regulation, of course they'll have more sibling conflicts. And when kids don't have the skills to work out conflict constructively.

And what reduces sibling rivalry is when a child feels close to the parents and confident about getting their needs met. When kids feel valued for being their unique selves. When kids are spaced further apart so they don't compete as much; different genders, again reduce competition. When kids regularly have fun together, so they begin to enjoy each other. And when there's a family culture of kindness and respect.

So let's talk now about what we want to teach our children so that they can navigate conflict and work conflict out constructively. Because often parents just tell me they want their children to stop fighting. But I don't think that's our real goal, stop fighting -- or even be nice to each other. I think our real goal is not the absence of conflicting needs and wants. That's not peace. Peace is the successful resolution of conflict. So our children learn to make peace when they encounter conflict and successfully resolve it, using the skills that create a peaceful outcome. Noticing their own needs and expressing them in a way that's respectful of other people, listening to the needs of other people, seeing multiple perspectives, and problem solving to craft win-win solutions that serve everyone. Those are the skills that allow your children to constructively stand up for themselves and get along with their siblings and allow you to have a more peaceful home.

00:17:47

So let's talk about how you can teach them. It may sound hard and it is hard, but luckily you'll have many times every single day to practice as long as you have more than one child in your home! 😊

As you know, one aspect of emotional intelligence is getting along with other people. So as you live with your children and teach emotional intelligence, you'll be giving them the skills to work things out with each other. What do I mean by teaching emotional intelligence? First, emotion coaching -- and we've already talked about that earlier in the course -- which means that in addition to empathizing with your child's feelings and helping them express and work them through, you're also going to be talking about feelings on a daily basis. You're going to ask questions about feelings and needs and wants and choices, just things like, "How did you feel about that? Oh my goodness and what did you do? How did that worked out? Did you get what you wanted?" And in this case you might add, "Did your brother get what he wanted? How do you think he felt about the whole thing? Were you able to work it out that both of you were happy with the result?"

Another part of modeling emotional intelligence is modeling "I" statements. An "I" statement simply means expressing what you need rather than judging or attacking someone else. So for instance when your daughter calls you a name, you can say to her, "Our rule is no name-calling. Name-calling hurts. Sweetheart, you can tell me what you're mad about without attacking me." Every time you're able to stay calm and do that, you're modeling for everyone in the family.

Of course, you'll have to go beyond modeling, there will be many times when no matter what you've modeled and how positive it is, your children will not be able to access that in their memory at that moment and recreate it. Instead, they'll resort to whatever they have on hand, mean words, even fists. So the question is how do you intervene at those moments and coach your kids to communicate their own needs and feelings in a more constructive way. That takes a lot of work on your part of noticing when your kids begin to bicker or treat each other badly and stepping in to give the child whose acting badly words that are more constructive to handle the situation.

So for instance let's say one of your children is playing happily and the younger child, a baby or a toddler comes up and starts pulling on their shirt and your older child yells, "No, go away." Most of us are tempted to say something like, "Be nice to the baby, he just wants to play with you." But instead, we have to see it also from the other child's perspective. He's just trying to solve his problem which is he's playing and the baby is tugging on him and instead we could say something like, "What are you trying to tell the baby? I hear you saying no, go away, do you not like it that the baby's pulling on your shirt? Why did you tell the baby that?" And then your older child will say something like, "No, don't pull my shirt," and the baby will look puzzled and you can go over and intervene and say "Oh look, you want big brother to look at you, so you're pulling on his shirt right? But big brother says 'please don't hold my shirt!' What else could we do here?"

And then you might broker a deal where the baby's allowed to in some small way help in the game, and if that doesn't work then you'll have to pick the baby up and remove the baby. There's nothing that says that the older child's job is to entertain the baby even though it would be easier

for us, obviously, if that were true. But notice what you're doing, you're teaching your older child to communicate in a way that is with words, not with shoving the baby away, and with kinder words. And also to express what he likes and doesn't like: "I don't like it when you pull my shirt," rather than just yelling at the baby, "No, go away."

00:22:01

Sometimes as you teach kids to say what they need, to make "I" statements to each other without attacking each other, you'll be intervening in a situation where one child is getting pushed around by the other.

Most of us want to run into that situation and tell the older child, "Stop pushing your sister around, you know better than that." But when you do that, what happens? You're setting your kids up to be a victim and a bully especially if this is repeated behavior between these two kids. One child feels powerless to do anything unless she squawks and you come running and the other child feels like you're always taking the sibling's side. But there's a better way to do this and that's to coach the child who's being pushed around to stand up for themselves. So if one of your kids is pushing the other, you can say, "Are you both having fun? Jeremy, I see a frown on your face. You can tell your brother if you don't like that pushing." And Jeremy might say, "No pushing" -- if he's a toddler -- and you might then have to reinforce Jeremy's words to the sibling if the sibling's older and stronger and say, "Did you hear what Jeremy said? Jeremy is saying no pushing." And your other child will probably at that point stop the pushing.

So notice that you are serving as back up to your child because the research shows that if you don't do that, the older child or the stronger child or the tougher child wins, and the other child acquiesces. That's not what you want to have happen. You want both children or all your children to feel comfortable expressing their needs and their wants and standing up for what they need and want and you want the other children to in fact respect that. So you will need at times to go in and serve as back up for a child when they're expressing something that the other kid is not listening to. So for instance let's say one of your children is teasing the other, you might say, "Melissa, it looks like you don't like those words from your sister," or even, "Words like that could really hurt. You can tell your sister 'I don't like it when you tease me that way'."

Now, if the sister doesn't listen to Melissa when she says, "I don't like it when you tease me that way," then you'll also have to add, "You know girls. our family rule is kindness. That means no name calling and no teasing." So you're always there as back up but you're coaching your kids to stand up for themselves.

Now what if that's not enough to stop the teasing? Well, all behavior is communication, so the child that's doing the teasing is communicating something. Now it could be any number of things. It might be that this child was teased herself at school today. Or it might be that daddy teases because that's just the way he expresses affection and so this child doesn't think that you're really serious about no teasing. Or maybe she's angry at her sister for some reason. Or maybe she's just bored and so she's teasing her sister out of boredom. Or maybe she just can't resist the power that comes from making someone else feel bad. Because it's hard to resist power no matter how old you are, and it's especially hard if you're a kid.

How you intervene with your child will depend on what you think the child is communicating with the teasing. If you think the child is angry at your other child, you might well need to intervene then and say something like, "Are you angry at your sister sweetheart? Because you can tell her that directly instead of trying to hurt her feelings with teasing." Then you help your child get off her chest whatever she's upset about that's leading her to poke at her sister. If she's just bored, you'll be able to see that and you'll be able to invite her to do something else maybe with you.

Now when I suggest that you help your child tell her sibling why she's upset, you might have found that a scary suggestion. Obviously we don't want to incite a big fight between our kids.

On the other hand, we don't want to shut down her anger. She's allowed to express what's going on with her and ask for what she needs and in fact, if she doesn't get practice doing that now, when is she going to learn it? So I think it's incumbent upon us as the parents to help our kids do that in a constructive way.

So again, you want to be there coaching so when she tells her sibling what she's angry about it doesn't come out as an attack. And you know most of the time what's under anger is hurt or fear. So you might find she starts with, "I'm mad at you because you always win." And then it comes down to, "You always do a little victory dance when you win and it hurts my feelings and I feel like I can never win and I'm just worthless and not a good person and you're perfect in every way and I hate you for it." Obviously, this is a child who needs help with her feelings of inadequacy compared to her sister and her feelings of hurt that her sister rubs it in when her sister wins.

And it's a great opportunity to talk about sportsmanship and how each person feels because they both want to win and when somebody loses and somebody wins, what's the best way to handle that.

00:27:38

This is also a great opportunity to talk about the word hate. I've heard from many parents that they ban the word hate; it's not allowed in their house. But I don't agree with that decision because what does hate actually mean? Hate means the child is angry, hate isn't a feeling though, it's not like you'd empathize with it, the way you would say, "Wow, you were so mad at your sister." You wouldn't say, "Wow, you really hate your sister." Right? That's inappropriate. We all know that somehow, but what is it that makes it inappropriate?

Well it's that hate is not a feeling. Hate is a position we take, hate is saying, "I am so angry at you that I will *never* work things out with you, no matter." So hate is a word you want to talk about in your family. Instead of banning it, you want to talk about what it means and then you want to provide the antidote to the hate. So you might say, "We're a family. That means we always work things out. Every relationship sometimes has conflict. Even people who love each other do get angry at each other and do fight with each other. But no matter how mad we get, when we calm down we always make things better with each other, because we're a family. We're always going to be there for each other and we will always love each other, no matter what."

I'm not by the way suggesting that you let your children stand and scream at each other, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you." The fact that they're learning to understand what the word means, doesn't mean that it's not a hurtful word. So you might say something like, "You're so mad right now that you're using the word hate, that's a powerful word. I hear how mad you must be to use it. You can be as mad as you want but words like that can really hurt someone's feelings. You can say what you're upset about without using hurtful language." So you can see again, this is just another version of "Say what you need without attacking your sibling."

00:29:45

So we've talked about how you can help your kids learn to express themselves constructively without attacking the other person, and how instead of rushing in to rescue a kid and blame the other kid, you can coach your child to stand up for themselves -- including when their sibling is teasing them or being unkind.

But what do you do when your children's skills fail them, and you hear loud yelling from the other room? Well, you go in, you take stock, and you figure out in this case that they're just yelling at each other. They're not actually hitting. And here's where most parents make their first mistake. We try to figure out who's right and who's wrong. Of course we think we can't intervene until we know who's right and who's wrong. So we know how to restore justice and order to the situation.

But here's the thing, it turns out that when we intervene that way, kids fight more. They end up with a worse relationship with each other. Well it's sort of obvious, right? First of all, they're not really gaining the skills to navigate conflict with each other and solve problems with each other. But there's more than that. When we step in and take sides with one kid over the other, what are we signaling? They're right, the other kid is not right, they're wrong. And since both kids think they're right, to them this is an indicator that you're preferring one kid over the other. You must love that kid more. And both kids take it that way. If you side with one kid, that kid will feel like, "I won, I'm better! Mom likes me best! Dad likes me best!" And the other kid will feel like, "Wow, mom or dad always takes their side, the other kid's side. They never understand me, no one in this home understands me. I never get what I want and it's all my siblings fault." So resentment festers.

So you can see how taking sides with either kid, even if you're right -- and by the way we're not always right. We may know that just now our daughter hit our son but maybe yesterday he hit her. So we're often not right -- but it doesn't matter if you're right. Even if you're all-seeing, it doesn't matter, because you're still communicating to one child that they're not the one you're going to pick and that creates more sibling rivalry.

So you might think this means you shouldn't intervene, you should let the kids work it out for themselves. And indeed that's the advice that experts have been giving to parents for the last 20 or 30 years. And indeed, when you don't intervene, it turns out that kids fight less. That's a good thing right?

Except when we started to look at the research, when we had cameras film the kids. Then we realized that what was happening is that the kids didn't fight as much -- but that's because there was no mom or dad to intervene and back up the house rules. So what was happening was the more powerful kid was winning. The other kid would just stop sticking up for themselves because there was no back-up and they were going to lose. So when we don't intervene, we're tacitly approving of bullying.

You may think that's strong language, either the bullying part or the tacit approval part. But it's definitely bullying if a child is learning to use force to get what they want. As to the tacit approval part, researchers have found that when a parent is in the home -- even if they're not paying attention to the kids, even if they're not aware there's a conflict -- if they let something happen between the kids, both kids take that as a tacit endorsement. "You know, dad was there reading the paper; he didn't say anything. He must've thought it was fine for one kid to do this to the other kid." So when we don't intervene at all kids win by force or intimidation, and yes there's less fighting, but you're teaching one kid to be a victim and one a bully.

So what are you supposed to do? You could intervene, but in a different way. So it turns out that when parents intervene by *not* taking sides, but standing up for whatever the house rules are, like "No hitting" or "Be kind," then the kids don't see the parent as stepping in on one side or the other. They see the parent as available to help solve a problem. The parent calms the situation, the parent helps the kids express themselves, listen to each other, come up with a win-win solution -- meaning a solution that works for both people -- repair things with each other if necessary. Basically the parent coaches the kids to navigate the conflict and also the parent talks about the house rules.

So what happens with the kids? The kids learn skills to work things out and they start to bring up the house rules in their own negotiations with each other. "The rule is no hitting, don't hit me." So you can see that as the parent intervenes in a coaching way, the kids are learning all kinds of skills, the skills that they'll need for next time. So eventually, the parent doesn't even have to be involved. The kids know how to work it out themselves.

00:35:17

So your number one rule when your kids are fighting? Don't take sides. Really. I know it's a big change in habit. Don't Take Sides.

I know it might be hard to imagine not taking sides, so let's go through a scenario. You hear a loud crash and you go running into your youngest child's room. It's Jacob and he's very upset because his big brother Kevin has just wrecked his Lego that he was building. As you go in they're shouting at each other and you say, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, you two sound like you're having a really hard time. What's going on here boys? How can I help?" So notice you're keeping your voice calm, as calm as you can. Even while you were running, you were trying to deep breathe. Your goal here is to settle the storm, not fuel it, and to help both your kids feel safe. Of course the kids are shouting at each other, calling each other names. Both of them trying to shout at you about what the other one did and you say, "I hear how angry you both are. The rule of our house is we treat each other with kindness and respect. I'm hearing screaming and hurtful

language. Let's all sit down. Come on, right here next to me, Kevin. Right here on my other side, Jacob. Now let's everyone take three deep breaths so we can calm down enough that we can listen to each other. One, two, three."

What if your kids are too angry to breathe? Well first of all, you've practiced this breathing at other times and they weren't angry right? When you were having fun together. That will make them more open to it when they are angry and it's an important skill to learn. But at that moment, maybe they are too angry to do the breathing. That's okay. You breathe anyway. Because it settles you down. And actually your children's limbic systems, their emotional systems, will take their cue from you. If you're calmer and you're breathing more calmly, they'll begin to breathe more calmly also. And over time, they will learn that this is just what you do when you want to calm yourself down before you have a difficult discussion. Wouldn't it be great if we'd all learned that as children?

So now you say, "Okay, I want to hear what's upsetting both of you, one at a time. You'll both get a chance to talk. Last time Kevin went first, this time Jacob goes first. I know it's hard to wait your turn. I'm going to have my hand right here on your knee, Kevin, while we listen to your brother and then we'll listen to you. Now, Jacob you start. What happened?"

And Jacob tells you how Kevin came in his room and messed up his Legos -- purposely knocked down the Lego thing he was building -- and he's quite upset about it and practically in tears and you acknowledge, you validate, you empathize. "Oh your Lego thing got knocked down, no wonder you're so upset, Jacob, you worked so hard on that. I see the Lego pieces all over."

All this time of course your other kid is wanting to burst in. So your hand has been on his knee but you also turn and you look at him and you say, "It's okay, Kevin, I know you're upset too, thanks for working so hard to listen to your brother calmly. We're going to listen to you in just a minute." And you go back to Jacob and you say, "I'm so sorry that happened, Jacob. I wish I was here to help. But I'm here now. Let's work this out."

And then you turn to the other child and you empathize with them also. "Kevin, you look so upset. What happened, Honey?" And Kevin bursts out with his tale, which let's say is that he had to break the Lego because Jacob went into the Halloween Candy that's in Kevin's bag that's stashed in the closet -- each kid gets to have one piece every night since Halloween was three weeks ago -- and he ate some of the candy. The telltale wrappers sure enough were in Jacob's room, and when Kevin found them he was livid. So he broke the Jacob's Lego.

And you say to Kevin, "Oh my goodness, your candy, that you've been saving. And I see one of the wrappers is your favorite kind of candy. No wonder you're mad. And you were so mad that you wrecked your brother's Lego, is that what happened?"

Now at this point many parents are thinking "Okay, he shouldn't have eaten his brother's candy. But the brother shouldn't have retaliated by breaking the Lego." And our tendency is to want to scold one or both of them. I'm suggesting you don't do that. All we're doing now is empathizing. They both need to be able to tell their story, because they both think they're right. After they have a chance to feel heard, their rage will begin to dissipate and the hurt feelings can be

expressed, and they can work something out with each other for repair. For you to jump in and lecture just blows that whole process so it doesn't happen.

Now it's very common for one kid to interrupt the other while they're having their turn to talk. Your job is to say, "It's okay honey, you're going to get a chance to talk too, one at a time. Right now it's Jacob's turn. You'll get your turn in a moment." But that's why it's so important that you maintain physical contact with both kids at the same time, so that both kids feel in connection with you.

00:41:03

Now this is the point where most parents think "Well, who's right and who's wrong? They both did something bad to each other!" And here's where I would say to you, "It doesn't matter!" It doesn't matter who's right and who's wrong; it doesn't matter who did something first. What matters is that they express themselves to each other, come up with solutions that work, and repair this. And you want to teach them the skills to do it, so you're not always in the middle of their fights. SO you don't want to be the decider here, or it's just going to create resentment between them and more fights in the future.

So now you say, "Let me see if I got this right?" And you repeat the stories that they told you. "So Jacob, you went into Kevin's Halloween Candy and you took some of it, and you brought it up here to your room and ate it, is that right? And the wrappers are here?" And he sort of nods shamefacedly. And then you look at Kevin, and you say, "And Kevin you were so mad about the candy that when you found the wrappers and you realized your brother was the one who had eaten the candy, you were really mad at him and you wrecked his Lego? Is that right, Kevin? " And Kevin who is still pretty mad but has had a chance now to get it off his chest, says, "That's right!"

So notice that both kids have had a chance to express themselves and they're already calming down and part of what's happening here is that your breathing is calm, and so your kids are resonating with your breathing so that they're calming down too. So look what you're doing here. Each child feels heard, each child gets to reflect and see how acting on their impulses got them into this situation. Each child hears the other child's side of the story so they're beginning to develop more empathy, more social intelligence and each child is developing impulse control. They're both furious but they're sitting here breathing through their rage and putting it into words, with your help. That supports their brain to process the emotions, rather than just lashing out. And it builds the neural circuitry so that they can regulate their anger better in the future.

So now you say, "So we have two very upset kids here. We have one boy whose candy was taken and he's so upset that he wrecked his brother's Lego building. And we have another boy whose Lego building is wrecked and he's so upset too. We have two upset boys. Right? And we have a lot of hurt feelings. Kevin, you must have been so sad when you discovered your candy was gone," and Kevin looks at you, and now that you're speaking to the sadness behind the anger, he's a little softer and he almost tears up a little bit and he says, "Yeah, I was saving it." Of course you're still touching both kids, and you say to Kevin, " I think your brother needs to hear how you feel about this." And Kevin turns to his brother.

Now, he might say something like, “I feel like you're an idiot,” which of course you would say, “Kevin, your brother needs to hear how mad you are. Tell him how you feel, not what you think about him right now.”

And Kevin looks at his younger brother and says, “I feel mad, and sad. I was saving my favorite pieces and you took them and ate them.” As he's able to actually express his feelings to his brother, the other child is able to hear it, and again develop empathy and see what the cost was of his action. That's so much more effective in helping him want to heal the transgression, than if we were lecturing, which would just make him defensive.

So you give your sad son a little hug around his shoulders and you turn to the other child and you say, “Jacob, can you tell your brother how you feel?” And Jacob says, “I feel bad I ate your candy, but...but... you didn't have to wreck my Legos, that's the worst.” And you say, “So you think that even though you ate the candy and you're sorry about that, that your brother shouldn't have wrecked your Legos?” “No! Now I have to build the whole thing again.”

So you can see that both kids are being more vulnerable now, instead of attacking. And you say, “You are so sad about your Legos, and you are so sad about your candy; we have two sad boys. What can we do to make this better?”

And both boys kind of look at each other and you say, “Well, somebody ate somebody's candy, is there a way to make that better? And somebody knocked down somebody's Lego, is there a way to make that better?”

At this point Jacob will probably say something like, “Kevin, I'll give you my candy, I still have some left. I can even give you extra if I don't have the kind you like best.” But then he'll probably continue, “But Kevin, you wrecked my Lego, will you help me fix it?” And at this point you might even find Kevin willing to fix it or Kevin might say, “No, I won't fix it! I'm still too mad. I want you to promise me you won't take my candy anymore.”

At which point Jacob is going to have to say, “Okay, I promise I won't take your candy anymore.” And that's a pretty necessary resolution, so that he feels safe trusting his brother in the same house as his candy.

00:46:35

So you can see that when the kids are able to express their feelings and respond to each other by making things better, they actually work things out in their relationship, often in a positive way. Now, what if it wasn't in a positive way? What if they've refused to engage in this process? I find that usually when that happens, there's one of two things going on. One, the child feels blamed or shamed or lectured, so we have to look at what we're bringing to the interaction.

And two, sometimes a child really has a chip on their shoulder toward the other child. And to work out a chip on the shoulder is not something you do with both kids in the room like this. You would work on that in special time, and in having one on one conversations about how much they liked it before their sibling came along or how wronged they feel on a regular basis by

their sibling, or how jealous they feel that their sibling is simply better at everything, or seems to be grandma's favorite, or whatever it is. And to make those conversations safe, you'll need to really empathize and not be judgmental, and simply talk -- and listen more than you talk -- with your child on a regular basis. There's more in my book **Peaceful Parent Happy Siblings** about how to have those conversations to melt away the chip on the shoulder. But the short version is just listen, empathize, acknowledge, really try to see how they might feel this way -- and allow yourself to feel the pain that your child is feeling. Once that pain is heard it can begin to evaporate.

You might also be thinking this was a very long conversation. My kids would never sit there for a conversation like this. But here's what I've noticed. Kids find human interaction really fascinating when it's relevant to them. Like, somebody wrecked their Lego or stole their candy. What they don't like is the uncomfortable feeling of being shamed, blamed or lectured. If you can *NOT* do that, your children are much more likely to be willing to sit through this kind of negotiation, because really there's something big in it for them. They get the wrongs that were done to them -- at least from their perspective -- redressed, and that's what they really want. And they also want things to be better with the people they love.

00:49:10

So now you know how to intervene in a sibling fight. But what about when the kids are physically fighting? Tempers are flaring, kids are pushing each other, or even hitting or punching each other. What do you do? Well, obviously if it's physical, the first thing you do is get between your kids to separate them and prevent them from hurting each other. "Whoa, stop!" You hold your hand out at chest level, or put your hand even on the child's belly if they're young, to keep them from moving closer to their sibling.

The second thing you want to do is calm everybody down. That's the only thing that's going to stop them from attacking, because remember, they attacked because they feel like there's a threat. So even though you're upset, consciously breathe as deeply as you can and as slowly as you can, and it will begin to calm you. Your children will get that it's not an emergency and their bodies will begin to calm also, resonating with yours. That doesn't mean they won't still be angry and upset emotionally, but it will begin to turn the tide.

Now, consciously make your voice deeper and calmer. Now if one child is hurt, focus on helping that child -- even though you're livid at the kid who's hurt your child, and you just want to go over and teach them a lesson. But in fact, they're not going to learn the lesson you want them to learn at that moment -- because really you feel like smacking them -- and all the research shows that just teaches them to smack their sibling. And if you go over and yell, they feel like you don't understand their side of things. They think there was a reason they had to attack their sibling, and they feel like you just don't understand, and they harden themselves so they don't take in what you say.

If in fact they're upset that their sibling is hurt, they didn't mean to hurt them that way, then you going over and yelling at them makes the shame worse and makes them want to deny that they actually did something hurtful. So the most constructive thing you can do regarding the

perpetrator at this moment when you're really angry is to ignore them. And that's fine, because really the person who needs you right now is the child who's hurt. I know you feel an urgent need to teach your kid a lesson but that's fight or flight talking, that's because you're in a state of emergency. In fact, you'll teach better once you calm down. Your child is not going anywhere. You know where she lives! You can find her later and talk with her.

Right now, you need to take care of the child who is hurt. So focus on that child and that will help you shift out of being Mama Bear or Papa Lion, and into being Nurturing Mama or Papa with a child who's hurt. So pick up your wounded child and take them off to the bathroom or the kitchen sink where you can tend to their wound or their owie with an ice pack. Just ignore the kid who did the hurting.

Now, if you can stay matter of fact about it and not yell at the kid who did the hurting, then it's great to involve them in the repair. So you can say, "Quick, Ethan, get an ice pack for your brother," and then Ethan gets to be involved in the repair. He's already redeeming himself! He's shifting from being the perpetrator who hurt someone, to being someone who can help and repair his mistakes. So that's a very positive thing at that point for your child, but only do it if you can stay relatively calm instead of having an angry voice when you interact with your child.

So you're tending to your wounded child, you're listening to their story, you're empathizing. "Yes, ouch! That must've surprised you when you fell down....Yes, your brother pushed you, I hear you. That surprised you, and it hurt your body, and I think it hurt your feelings, too. It sounds like you have something to tell your brother, it sounds like you want to tell him, 'Don't push me!'"

So here's the thing, your child who did the pushing is not really ready to hear from the sibling yet, at least not in any open hearted way.

In fact, that child might have followed you into the kitchen where you're tending to your child and be trying to explain their point of view, to prove that they didn't really do anything wrong. That hitting their brother was a necessary action, because they were being affronted in some way and it's all the brother's fault. So what you really need is a cooling down period. But don't send them to their rooms, which will make them feel less safe. Your goal is to teach them self-calming techniques so they can learn to shift out of an upset state and re-regulate themselves when they do have an upset like this.

So you can say to your child who's yelling about how it wasn't his fault and how right he is, "I see how mad you are. I want to hear about this. Let's all cool off for a few minutes, so we can talk reasonably and hear each other. I'm going to take care of your sibling right now because there's an owie here that really hurts. I need you to take some deep breaths to get calm. You have a choice, you can breathe with me here with your sibling or you can go to the cozy corner and breathe."

If you can really use a calm voice like this, your child actually is already calming down. You can say, "Okay, let's all take three deep breaths together, let's blow out all those angries. Now let's do it again, deep breath. Blow out all those angries."

Many kids won't want to do this when they're angry, of course. So you'll have to practice this at a time when they're not angry, when you're having discussions about how to calm down when you're angry -- How you can calm down and how they can calm down. And you'll practice it in a family. That way when you do introduce the idea when they're angry, they're at least more open to it having done it before. But at the same time you'll be acknowledging you're both really angry. "I hear you, I want to hear more about it but I can't hear with loud voices when you're yelling. We all need to take some deep breaths and then we can talk about it."

Now if you can see that the child who did the hitting is just too upset to talk, then you need to finish tending to the hurt child and holding them in your arms or holding them by the hand, you take them and you try to get them interested in something else that they can do and you tell them that we're all going to talk in a few minutes.

00:55:53

This is why I recommend that on a regular basis you create new sensory boxes that you pull out only when you have an emergency like this and you really need to keep your child distracted while you're on the phone, or while their sibling's having a meltdown, or in the aftermath of a fight like this where you really need to tend to the hitting child, for instance, so they can calm down enough to actually hear about how their offense affected their sibling.

If you have a closet with some sensory bins at the top of the closet, then you can just pull one down and give it to the child who was hurt, who now feels better because you've already tended to them. They'll get into the sensory box and they'll be able to focus on that and not need immediately to interact with you and the sibling. And then you can help the sibling who did the hurting with the big feelings that drove them to hurt and then you can help things get resolved between the two siblings.

So now you take the child who did the hurting to the cozy corner and you get them set up there with something that's going to calm them down like a jar of glitter that they can shake and watch settle. If you haven't already gotten the sibling situated, you give them a hug and you say, "I'll be right back sweetheart. I want to hear why you were so upset." If the sibling is already set up with their sensory box and doing fine, then you just stay there with your upset child.

00:57:19

Notice there's been no shame, no blame. Obviously you're angry. They hurt your other child. It's a big deal. Usually kids get punished for that. But I'm suggesting not to punish. Because when you do that, you reinforce the very things that are making your child hit. Hitting is caused by fear. Sometimes you can see why the child's afraid. Their younger sibling is coming to knock down the tower they're building. But sometimes the sibling is just existing. Or has been on your lap. And that causes fear. Even if your child can't express it, and it seems like your child is hitting for no reason at all, there's some big upset, a fear locked away that moves your child into fight or flight so their sibling begins to look like the enemy.

Usually this is fear that you no longer love them, now that they have a replacement. Usually that fear is mixed up with grief for what they have lost, and with a sense of powerlessness and helplessness, and with fear that they're a bad person -- because they know they're angry at their sibling and they don't know why. They know they're supposed to love them.

Once you help your child with those feelings, your child will stop hitting. So the most important thing you can do to stop your child from hitting is to use the peaceful parenting practices. Use your own self-regulation, so when your child hits, you're not exploding. Because when you do that you're reinforcing and perpetuating the hitting.

I've had many parents tell me over the years that they just can't help themselves when their toddler or preschooler hits the baby, they lose it. And that's completely understandable. Every one of us would want to lose it in that instance. But if you're telling me you just can't control yourself, you just have to explode at your toddler or your preschooler in that instance, I submit to you, that you are teaching your toddler or preschooler that under some conditions, it's okay to explode at another person who is younger and smaller.

Because that's what you're modeling. You're saying you can't help yourself -- but you're an adult! I know the conditions pull for you to explode. Of course! Everyone would feel that way. But that doesn't mean you can't regulate yourself. Even in that extreme situation, we're asking your toddler or your preschooler -- with a much less developed prefrontal cortex -- to control themselves when the baby does something like crawl toward their tower to knock it over -- we're asking them to control themselves. So we wouldn't ask us to control ourselves? Even when we know it makes a tremendous difference in whether this will happen again next time? Because every time you explode, I guarantee you, you're adding fuel to the fire for your child to hurt the baby or the younger child again next time.

I want to share with you something that a mom wrote me. "The four year old," Kelly wrote, "has not hit the one year old since I spoke with you. When I realized that how she was acting was normal, everything changed. I think I was just so mad at her, and it was making her more scared. So she was hitting more."

1:00:48

Okay, so we're back talking to your child and you're self-regulating, so you're not exploding at them. In fact, you're listening. I said that the peaceful parenting practices were going to be your best tool to help your child stop hitting and reflect on what happened with their sibling. This is where you're using -- obviously your self-regulation, which we've talked about -- and of course the other peaceful parenting practices are also essential here. Connecting with your child, so your child feels loved appreciated and accepted even with all those jealous, angry feelings. They're allowed to talk to you about them.

Finally, emotion coaching your child, to help your child work through all those emotions. You're not just trying to control the behavior, which is what you would do by putting them on the naughty step. (Although the research on that shows that it doesn't help them with the emotions,

since they come off the naughty step feeling like they just want to get even with their sibling, and they're even angrier at you because you just don't understand.)

So now you're with your child in the cozy corner and you need to work with your child about the fact that they just hit their sibling. What do you do? You create safety. You say, "Eva, you must have been so upset to hit your sister." And Eva looks at you like she's sure you're about to reprimand her. So you put your arms around her and you say, "Oh my goodness, you must have been so upset. What happened sweetheart?" And if she really feels safe she'll take a chance and say, "Well my sister was doing X, Y, Z. She took my doll or she touched my doll or she looked at my doll," whatever the offense was that drove her to hit. And your job is to acknowledge that, "Oh, no wonder you were so upset. She took your doll, your favorite doll, you love that doll. It's so special to you. You were so upset right?" And you hug her, and you really sit with it.

Don't be in a hurry to rush on to the correction part. Really acknowledge. It's not a teachable moment until the student is ready to learn. And your child won't be ready to learn until they've had a chance to process these emotions.

You might even say if this is a pattern, "It seems like there's so many things of yours that she touches. Right? And that makes you feel bad. It's so hard to share so many things with your sister. You even have to share your mom and dad right?" At this point she might even start crying because she feels so understood. If she does, bingo. My goodness, let her cry. She might not cry, of course, she might angrily tell you all the many things she has to share with her sister.

But if you can stay safe, soft, welcoming of her feelings, understanding the pain she's in, she's going to be able to share it with you. And it will get down to tears or at least her eyes will well up at some point.

After you've done this, after she's worked that out, *then* you say, "I see why you were so upset. AND you know hitting is never okay. Hitting hurts. Hitting your sister is never okay no matter what."

And she'll look at you and you'll say, "Right? What could you do next time she looks at your doll, instead of hitting her?" And if you can do that in a non-blaming or shaming or lecturing way, she'll probably now have some ideas, like "I could call you for help!" Practice those ideas with her. Be very enthusiastic about them. Practice them with her -- and shake on it! Make a deal, even write out an agreement that she signs about what will happen, how she will handle it next time. And make sure there's a role for you to play too, like to come and help when she needs help with her sister, and you sign too. So it's a real agreement.

So you give her a hug and you tell her how proud you are of her and then you say, "Next time you want to hit her, what can you do?" And teach your child the move that I teach which I think you've heard earlier in this course, where when the child wants to hit, they clap their hands around their own body so the right arm goes on the left shoulder or around the left rib cage, and the other arm does the opposite and just clap their hands around. Make it a fun thing, practicing that together.

So your child has some alternatives in the moment instead of hitting. By now your child feels a lot better and you can do a reenactment of the two siblings talking where they tell each other how they feel, the same way that we talked about earlier in this audio. The difference of course is that you didn't go right into that process after the fight, because you had a child who was hurt and a child who was really too upset to be able to have a constructive discussion. They just weren't open at that point to repair.

1:06:17

You may be wondering, “Shouldn't I punish my child for hurting the other child? I mean Dr. Laura you don't believe in punishment, but surely though for this, there needs to be some consequence.” My answer is, “Punishment won't stop the hitting.” What will stop the hitting is the relationship with you, the connection with you. And for some kids who have impulse issues, working with that child on impulse control and clapping their arms around their body. But remember they're not going to be motivated to use those skills without the relationship with you to motivate them. But really it's about their relationship with you, and expressing those feelings to you so they don't have to act them out. And I would encourage you to listen to the Week Five audio, if for some reason you skipped it. It's about Discipline. And there is a whole scenario of what happens when one sibling hits the other kid, and what you could do to make that better and whether you should punish.

So I'm afraid we're out of time. There are so many more things I'd like to share with you! But happily they are all covered in **Peaceful Parent Happy Siblings**. You'll find information there on parent practices that reduce sibling rivalry like never comparing your children, and practices to teach your children like how to divide a treat or sweeten the deal. And family policies, like how to handle sharing and whether to make kids apologize. (Here's the spoiler, the answer is no!)

1:07:50

I want to close today by acknowledging that it's a lot of work to parent siblings this way. Most of us didn't learn these practices when we were growing up teaching them to our children takes a lot of effort on our parts.

A mom named Iris wrote to me, “Our daughters are very close. They demonstrate empathy toward each other regularly. I attribute much of this to the strategies you suggest, because it was not like that from the beginning. It was a long road.”

And so I want to acknowledge it's a long road, and a lot of work to help kids to get to the point where instead of calling each other names, they can express their needs to their sibling and work out a conflict productively. But it is so worth it! Because even though you repeat yourself and repeat yourself, and intervene and intervene, over time you'll begin to see that you intervene less, repeat yourself less -- because your children step up, and they begin to work things out with each other without your help. You'll realize that you've taught your children skills that they will use to make every relationship they ever have better. And you'll be raising children who want to be friends for life.

Thank you so much for joining me today, for your commitment to your children and for your courage in committing to peaceful parenting. This ends Week 11, Siblings, of the **Peaceful Parent Happy Kids *Online Course***. This is Dr. Laura Markham of [Aha!Parenting.com](http://Aha!Parenting.com).