

Calm Parents, Happy Siblings

How to stop the
fighting and raise
friends for life

Dr Laura Markham



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Minimize sibling rivalry, maximize positive connection

Are your children constantly fighting?

Do you struggle to stay calm and in control?

There's no way around it: sibling rivalry is universal. The good news is that there are specific things you can do to stay calm and help your children develop a strong, positive bond that trumps natural jealousy and competitiveness. Drawing on Dr Markham's work with thousands of families and building on her highly effective parent-coaching approach, you'll find out how to:

- Get your children's relationship off to a good start - and stay on the right track
- Help them look for win-win solutions rather than settling into fighting
- Create a family culture of support and co-operation

Whether you have a baby and an older sibling, toddlers, pre-schoolers, or older children, *Calm Parents, Happy Siblings* gives you a practical, step-by-step blueprint to transform your family life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The author's children, ages three and seven

Dr Laura Markham is the author of *Calm Parents, Happy Kids: The Secrets of Stress-free Parenting*. She earned her PhD in clinical psychology at Columbia University and has worked as a parenting coach with countless families across the English-speaking world. A leading advocate for parents and children, she makes frequent TV and radio appearances and has been featured in hundreds of publications from *Redbook* to the *Wall Street Journal*.

Dr Laura's free coaching e-newsletter has more than 90,000 subscribers. You can sign up at her website, AhaParenting.com, which serves up Aha! Moments for parents of babies through teens. You can also join her community on Facebook (facebook.com/AhaParenting) and follow the latest research in parenting via Twitter [@DrLauraMarkham](https://twitter.com/DrLauraMarkham).

Dr Laura is the mother of two children. Her goal is to change the world, one child at a time, by supporting parents.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR Calm Parents, Happy Siblings

‘This book delivers hope and help. Laura Markham brilliantly applies her respectful, attuned, limit-setting approach to sibling dynamics. Full of realistic scenarios and scripts for how parents can turn conflict into opportunities to build skills, and turn parental dread into meaningful intervention, *Calm Parents, Happy Siblings* masterfully coaches parents on how to honor each child’s experience, set limits, reduce conflict, and build skills for life.’

- Tina Payne Bryson, PhD, co-author of *The Whole-Brain Child* and *No-Drama Discipline*

‘Parents need all the help they can get to be the kind of parents they want to be, and to use parenting skills that influence their children to be good citizens of the world. Dr Laura’s book is filled with this kind of help – practical, inspiring, and encouraging through real-life examples. It would have helped me a lot when I was raising my children.’

- Dr Jane Nelsen, author and co-author of the *Positive Discipline* series

‘Finally, a book that answers your questions around sibling rivalry! In this insightful book, Dr Markham draws on scientific research to craft smart strategies that any parent can use to help their children resolve their conflicts with empathy, mindfulness, and peace. A must-read for every parent.’

- Dr Shefali Tsabary, author of *The Conscious Parent* and *Out of Control*

‘Adding a child to the family creates a cascade of challenges. Dr Laura Markham shows parents how to avoid

common sibling difficulties, and how to convey their love, even in stressful situations, so children truly feel supported. Open this book, and you'll find clarity, wisdom, workable ideas, and generous helpings of respect for parents and children.'

- Patty Wipfler, founder of Hand in Hand Parenting

'Refreshingly positive and respectful in its tone, *Calm Parents, Happy Siblings* lovingly guides parents by using scripts and practical examples, essential tools for any parent with more than one child. Dr Laura's compassionate approach is empowering for parents, and liberating for children.'

- Lysa Parker and Barbara Nicholson, founders of Attachment Parenting International and authors of *Attached at the Heart*

'Brothers and sisters, rejoice! Here's a family roadmap to transform bickering kids into a connected sibling team. One third of kids have a warm caring relationship with their siblings. Read this book and your family can join the ranks.'

- Heather Shumaker, author of *It's Okay Not to Share*

'A phenomenal book for parents with multiple children! Dr Markham addresses all of the common sibling issues with sensible solutions to bring peace and foster healthy relationships between siblings. This book will be my constant companion for years to come.'

- Rebecca Eanes, author of *Lasting Bonds: Building Connected Families Through Positive Parenting*

'Whether you are just beginning to contemplate having a second child or you are already frustrated by non-stop sibling fighting, this book is for you. I marvelled at the amount of wisdom, compassion, and practical ideas packed

into its pages. The wisdom begins with her gentle reminder that we have to start with ourselves if we want to make meaningful changes in our children's relationships with each other. The compassion is in Dr Laura's empathy for everyone in the mix - including angry and worried parents. And the ideas aren't just practical and usable - many of them are downright fun. You'll laugh out loud just reading them, and everyone will laugh when you try them out. Wouldn't that be a nice change from bickering and clobbering?'

- Lawrence J. Cohen, PhD, author of *Playful Parenting*

'As a parenting coach, I know that sibling struggles can be heart-wrenching for parents. Dr Laura's strategies are right on the money to help today's parents create more peaceful homes - and stronger sibling relationships. Great work!'

- Amy McCreedy, founder of Positive Parenting Solutions and author of *If I Have to Tell You One More Time* and *The 'Me, Me, Me' Epidemic*

'This book walks parents through sibling scenarios - even ones for very intense children - and breaks down the specifics of how to approach common struggles, without making parents feel guilty or overwhelmed. It is a wonderful resource that gives parents the tools to not only help our children while in the midst of conflict, but also helps us teach our children how to be the loving, kind, and respectful brothers and sisters we know they can be.'

- Gina Osher, *The Twin Coach*

'If you are the parent of more than one child, this is the book for you. Laura Markham begins at the beginning - the how and when to tell your child that they are about to become a big brother or sister - and then offers concrete suggestions to help you lay down the foundation for a

healthy sibling relationship throughout your children's lives. I know that I will highly recommend this book to all my clients.'

- Rev. Susan Nason, parent educator

'Dr Laura's examples and coaching-based methodology make parenting siblings far less daunting. . . . Her book reassures us that doing our best with the right tools, including self-regulation, connection, and coaching, can build a much happier and more peaceful family.'

- Nancy Peplinsky, founder and executive director of
Holistic Moms Network

Calm Parents, Happy Siblings

How to stop the
fighting and raise
friends for life

Dr Laura Markham



Vermilion
LONDON

When you have one child, you're a parent. When you have two, you're a referee.

- DAVID FROST

Before you can teach your kids to listen, identify the problem, express their feelings, generate solutions, and find common ground, you have to learn those problem-solving skills yourself.

- LAURA DAVIS AND JANIS KEYSER, *BECOMING THE PARENT YOU WANT TO BE*

You mean the baby could be a boy? But I'm your boy. I guess it's okay ... We can always send him back, right?

- THE AUTHOR'S SON, AGE THREE

INTRODUCTION

I wasn't prepared for my son's reaction when his little sister was born. At four, he'd had only a few tantrums in his entire life. But when the baby appeared, he seemed to panic. He was clingy, he was angry, he was scared. I was trained as a psychologist, but I was out of my league.

Like me, most parents look forward to the awe on our older child's face as he or she gazes for the first time at our newborn. We imagine the baby laughing as her big brother entertains her with funny faces. When one child gets hurt, the other will replay the care he's received from us, offering his sibling a hug and a blankie. Over time, romping through the sprinkler will give way to bike rides and camping out, which will give way to arguing over who gets the car on Saturday night and consoling each other over lost games and broken hearts. They may head their separate ways after secondary school, but that bond will continue through all the ups and downs of adulthood. We want to believe that we're giving our children a priceless gift: a friend for life.

But sometime in the first year - maybe even before the baby arrives - most parents begin to realize things may not be quite so simple, as I hear from the families I coach:

- *'She loves her brother ... In fact, she hugs him so hard that it scares us ... Her hands always seem to end up around his neck.'*

- *'I can't even drive the car safely because they can't keep their hands off each other.'*
- *'He really pushed me to my limit when I came out of the shower and realized he had peed on his nine-month-old brother!'*

There's no way around it. Sibling rivalry is universal. After all, every human is genetically programmed to protect resources that will help him survive, and your children *depend on* and *compete for* what are, in fact, precious resources - your time and attention. Even when there's plenty of love to go round, young humans haven't developed much impulse control, so they're bound to get into conflicts. Finally, temperament colours every relationship. Children who tend to be challenging will be even more challenging when you introduce a brother or a sister, and some siblings simply clash.

Unfortunately, many parents don't know how to help kids with these strong emotions, so hurt feelings can lead to aggressive acts, which can spiral into negative patterns of interacting with each other. Those hard feelings can set the tone in a sibling relationship right through the teen years, and even have a way of popping up at family stress points across a life span.

But there's good news, too. The sibling relationship is where the rough edges of our early self-centredness are smoothed off, and where we learn to manage our most difficult emotions. Siblings often become good friends, and because they know each other so well, they can provide each other a deep sense of comfort. Even siblings who fight a lot usually do gain respect for each other and eventually get along. When they're grown, many siblings feel a deep connection to the only other people who understand what it was like to grow up in their home.

And here's the best news of all. Parents can make a tremendous difference in shaping the sibling relationship.

Sibling jealousy is unavoidable, but it's almost always possible to help children develop a strong, positive bond that trumps the natural jealousy. It's not always easy to raise siblings who appreciate each other, who become friends for life – but a committed parent can make all the difference. I wrote this book to show you how.

When I was struggling after the birth of my second child, the only book on siblings that I could find was *Siblings Without Rivalry* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, and it stayed on my bedside table for years. This is still the book I recommend first to parents of school-age children whose kids are having a hard time with each other. But as a mother with a baby and a young child, I faced daily challenges such as how to keep my son busy while I nursed his sister, how to help him learn to be gentle when he gave her those overzealous hugs, how to handle it when she started crawling and went after his toys. There were constant challenges in those early days as a growing family; I wanted specific strategies to transform those challenges into closeness between my children. I had read enough research to know that the foundation of my children's relationship was being laid in that first year or two, but I couldn't find a roadmap.

As the years went by, I finished my PhD in clinical psychology at Columbia University and founded the website AhaParenting.com. My practice as a parenting coach gave me a window into tens of thousands of families, so I saw first-hand what worked, and what didn't, when families found themselves struggling. I built on the empathic model promoted by Faber and Mazlish and their mentor, Haim Ginott, one of the grandfathers of today's positive parenting movement, to integrate new findings from research on emotion, attachment, and brain development (please see the [acknowledgements](#)). Observing the dynamics in the families I worked with, combined with my own mindfulness practice, taught me how parents can take

control to shift the patterns in their families, not by controlling their children, but by changing their own thoughts, feelings, words, and actions. I've found that parenting gets a lot easier when we as parents can do three very hard things:

1. Regulate our own emotions.
2. Stay connected with our child, even when we're setting limits or the child is upset.
3. Coach instead of controlling, by fostering emotional intelligence, guiding with empathic limits instead of punishment, and supporting mastery.

These three ideas will transform your relationship with your children so they're happier, emotionally healthier, and more cooperative - and you're calmer and more fulfilled in your parenting. They're fully explained in my first book, *Calm Parents, Happy Kids: The secrets of stress-free parenting*. To me, these ideas are the key to finding the joy in parenting. And because they're the foundation of raising happy children, they're also essential to a happy sibling relationship, as described by one of my readers:

After applying your three big ideas (self-regulation, connection, coaching), my six-, five-, and three-year-old all get along more often now. As each of them felt stronger in their connection to me, they seemed to feel less anxiety inside and thus less of a need to act out by fighting with their siblings.

- Anna

As transformative as these ideas can be for a family, parents still ask me the kinds of questions I struggled with when my children were young. How can they:

- Help young children develop the skills to express their needs and stand up for themselves – and also listen to their siblings?
- Help two small children, or even three, work through strong emotions at the same time?
- Create a family culture of cooperation and support that gives sibling love a chance to win out over sibling rivalry?

Luckily, there are solutions that really help. Every family has unique challenges, but there are proven, research-based ways to get your kids' relationship with each other started off on the right foot, and to keep them on track to a satisfying relationship. Even when kids are temperamentally mismatched or fiercely competitive, there are strategies that work to minimize sibling rivalry and maximize positive connection. Not all siblings can be best friends, but they can all learn to respect each other and honour their differences. This book details those strategies, giving you practical step-by-step blueprints to transform your children's relationship with each other.

As you've no doubt already figured out, just ordering children to 'get along' doesn't help them learn to manage their emotions, communicate their needs, or resolve their differences. Peace doesn't come from pushing conflicts under the surface; they inevitably erupt again, all too often while you're driving, pushing the supermarket trolley, or eating dinner at Grandma's. But if you give kids the skills to navigate the complex terrain of human emotion and relationships, you'll raise children who can work things out with each other. They'll be able to advocate for their own needs while respecting the needs of others. And they'll learn to look for win/win solutions rather than settling into bully and victim roles. In short, you'll raise kids who love deeply, regulate their emotions, and have healthy relationships. Not only will your children forge a close and

lifelong sibling bond, but they'll thrive with peers, co-workers, and their eventual partner. They'll be the kind of person we need more of in the world.

Families are the crucibles that transform infants into mature human beings. No matter how hard things are in your family right now, it *is* possible to create a home where differences are resolved amicably, and to raise children who are friends for life.

If You're Welcoming a New Baby

If you're able to read this book before your baby arrives, or during your first year with a new baby in the family, then Part 3 is especially for you. If your family is at a different stage, I suggest you skip Part 3, and focus instead on the ideas in Parts 1 and 2.

If Your Children Are Constantly Fighting

What works for us is my being there to intervene, coach, model, prevent the breakdowns and fights on the days that are rough. For me this has made a huge difference. I don't see many of my mum friends doing that ... even the really, really awesome ones. Not because they don't care but because we are all so busy! It's like someone needs to give us permission to just let everything else go and focus on the relationships.

- Beth

If your children are fighting a lot, you're probably feeling discouraged. It may help to remember that no matter how you parent, all children will fight sometimes – just as all couples will fight sometimes, no matter how solid a relationship they have. Fighting doesn't mean anyone is a bad person – not you, and not your children.

Maybe you find yourself wondering why your child is always the one hitting the baby while everyone else's children seem to love their new siblings. Remember, though, that you can't see inside anyone else's family. All children get jealous sometimes, no matter how loving they may act in public.

Maybe you're ready to scream because your toddler keeps hitting, no matter how many times you patiently teach him that hitting hurts. Don't give up. Research shows that young children often hit, no matter what parents do, presumably because they're still developing the prefrontal cortex that will give them more self-control. But as parents keep modelling and teaching a calmer approach, their children show more kindness to their siblings and more ability to regulate their emotions than children who have been raised with conventional discipline.¹ Your patience *is* making a difference, even if you can't see it yet.

Or maybe your children can't get through a day without some unpleasantness towards each other, so you wonder if you've done something wrong. The answer is No. You've done as well as you could with the resources you had. After all, your children were born with certain temperaments, and you were just trying to get dinner on the table without falling apart yourself. You're not perfect, but neither is anyone else. Most likely you simply have more challenging children. Parents who have easier children may not understand this, but I talk to thousands of parents, and it's quite clear that some children are more challenging than others.

The truth is, parenting as well as we can is always hard – really, truly, the hardest thing any of us has ever done. It’s physically and emotionally exhausting. Too often we’re pushed to put our own needs second, or third, or – unsustainably – even off the list. Raising children challenges us to rise above our natural human feelings of need and want, to give, give, give to another human who is too young to show any gratitude.

So life with children is always challenging, even under the best of circumstances – and most of us don’t live in the best of circumstances. Most of us have multiple stressors in our lives and are so busy trying to keep up that sometimes it seems as if we end up raising our kids in our spare time. Like all humans, we get stressed and emotionally ‘dysregulated.’ That makes us lose our easy, enjoyable connection with our kids. Since our children depend on that connection to stay regulated themselves, they get emotionally off-kilter, too, so they act out, towards us and towards each other.

One of the solutions to this is to remember that our children are, in fact, our most important job; we’re raising humans. We’re shaping not only their relationships with each other, but their very brains. *Coaching your children so they develop emotional intelligence is what transforms their relationship with each other.* Who cares if you serve your children cheese and crackers and carrot sticks for dinner again? What matters most for who your children become and the relationship they develop with each other is their daily life as children. Sure, genetics has a lot to do with it. But the interaction of those genes with environment is what shapes your children.

This book has the tools you need to transform your family life. I hope you’ll find some Aha! Moments. I know you’ll also find that it takes real time and commitment to put these powerful tools to work. So I’m giving you explicit permission to prioritize your children, and their

relationship with each other. There will be some days when you simply can't get to do the washing up, the laundry, the emails. The only way to keep your children from bashing each other will be to sit on the floor with them to prevent the fights, to coach them to express their needs without attacking, and to find ways to transform tension into closeness with laughter or with tears. This is heroic work, especially because it's so private - no one is there to see what it costs you. But it's not as invisible as it seems. Just as a tree's rings record environmental conditions year by year, your children's experience now is creating the people they're growing into. Every day, you are literally shaping who your children will be for the rest of their lives. And don't worry, there's also a very immediate payoff, which you'll see in increasingly positive interactions between your children.

I say this well aware that you'll still have days when your kids will be on each other every five minutes. That doesn't mean you're not doing a good job. It means this is very hard work. If you keep prioritizing relationships in your family over whatever else you think you 'should' be doing, if you keep digging deep for your own emotional generosity, you'll see your kids begin to soften towards each other. It might be hard to imagine your children becoming best friends, but the foundation stone of emotional intelligence that you're building will at the very least support a respectful relationship - and maybe something much closer.

Is it easy? No. Self-regulation is the hardest work any of us ever do, but that's the essential first ingredient for calm parenting. Don't worry. You don't have to be perfect at it. It's always a work in progress. There is no perfect parent, because there are no perfect humans. What matters is that we notice when we're off track, get ourselves back in balance, and reconnect with our kids.

Luckily, our children learn a lot from the times we miss the mark, because they'll miss the mark, too. Role

modelling how to gracefully navigate the shoals of human imperfection is one of the most valuable gifts we can give each child – and their sibling relationship – because it teaches them how to forgive themselves and each other.

So please summon up all your compassion and forgive yourself, right now, for being human. Decide right now that instead of criticism, you'll give yourself extra nurturing when you're not at your best – which happens, on a regular basis, to every parent. Really. No matter what. I don't care what you've done while you were exhausted or furious. You're human, which means you make mistakes, and you can grow. You don't have to have parented perfectly, and you don't have to be perfect in the future. Whatever is happening in your family right now, that's where you start.

Figure out what support you need. Self-care? Information? Counselling? A written agreement with your partner about how to handle certain problems? Or maybe simply strategies to handle the situations that stump you? (This book will give you lots of those.) Once you give yourself that support, you can start turning things around with your children.

Whether your children are toddlers, pre-schoolers, or much older, you can teach them the skills to get along with each other. You can create a family culture of support and respect. Even more important, you can help each child with the emotions that cause hostility towards their sibling. And you can deepen your closeness with each child, so he feels safe enough to work through those emotions, and so he never, ever fears that you might love his sibling more than you love him. All of this begins with your ability to manage your own emotions and find ways to connect with each child.

Worried that the damage is done? It is never too late. What matters is that you admit that you're not happy with the way things are, and that you commit to intervening to make things better. Castigating your child to become a

better sibling won't work. Neither will shame, blame, or punishment – of your child, or of yourself. But changing your own actions, to meet your child's needs and help him with his emotions, will always work. Is it a lot of work? A tremendous amount. Is it worth it? See what this mum has to say.

When Grant was born we went through an extremely difficult period with Dean – it was to the point that I literally couldn't turn my back without him hitting the little one. At the time we were doing time-outs, etc. – often carrying him kicking and screaming to another room – and today I feel so much guilt about that! I used to get very upset and yell at him when he would hit his brother and have explosive tantrums. I do worry that a full year of getting so upset at him has done some damage.

The same mum, two years later:

I've worked very, very hard to cultivate a sense that we treat each other respectfully and fairly – the way we'd like to be treated. I praise them regularly for being kind to each other and encourage them to do little favours for each other. For example, three-year-old Grant decides he wants to take his pick-up truck when we're ready to head out the door, and five-year-old Dean runs upstairs to get it. I sing Dean's praises – literally – doing a 'best big brother' dance. We encourage them to hug and kiss and to be thoughtful of each other. In general we just focus a lot on how great it is to have a brother and playmate ... and how we're all in this together.

Grant and Dean are lucky to have a mother who didn't give up, or give in to her frustration and hopelessness. Instead, she got down to work, every single day. She regulated herself. She helped her boys with their big emotions. She met their individual needs. She created a family culture of appreciation and support. And she's raising sons who will be friends for life.

You can, too.

My first book, *Calm Parents, Happy Kids: The secrets of stress-free parenting*, describes how to notice the big emotions that high-jack us, restore yourself to a state of calm, connect with your child, and emotion-coach your

child so he develops self-discipline and *wants* to cooperate without any need for punishment. In this book, you'll find out how to apply those lessons to raising siblings. There isn't space to fully restate the foundation for parenting outlined in *Calm Parents, Happy Kids*; I hope you will, or already have, read that book. While this book is a comprehensive source of tools to help you facilitate a happy relationship between your children, you'll find that it becomes much more powerful when you combine it with the tools for self-regulation, connection, and coaching that are outlined in depth in *Calm Parents, Happy Kids*.

PART ONE

CALM PARENTING 101

All siblings will do some fighting, no matter what their parents do. Conflict is a part of every human relationship, and you can't stop your children from having needs and desires that sometimes clash. What you *can* do is give them healthy tools to work through those disagreements, tools they'll use for the rest of their lives.

Every child is unique, and some siblings do have a harder time with each other. So it may surprise you to learn that the key ingredient to a healthy, fun-filled, satisfying dynamic between your children is not their behaviour or temperament. These are important, of course. But the key is you.

Decades of research on siblings and families have produced fascinating findings. I'll discuss many throughout this book. But here's one of the most important, confirmed by numerous studies:

When parents have better relationships with their children, those children have happier relationships with each other. When parents have more negative or punitive relationships with each child, the children behave more aggressively and selfishly with each other.¹

So while you can't control your children, you *can* control someone who has a tremendous influence on how your children relate to each other. You.

Yes, your children will inevitably feel some rivalry with each other. There will be times in every family when siblings seem to fight about every little thing, or say they hate each other. But it is usually possible to help the love win out over the rivalry, by using a child-raising approach that I call 'calm parenting.'
