

A Conversation between

Dr. Laura Markham & Alissa Marquess of Creative with Kids

Alissa: Hi, welcome today. This is Alissa Marquess from Creative with Kids. I'm here talking with Dr. Laura Markham. I'm so excited to have you here, Laura.

Dr. Laura: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Alissa: You are the writer of **Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids**, which is a book that I've listened to on audio — and that was a great way for me to be able to listen to it in this busy time of my life with three kids — and you are the mother of two, a 19-year-old and a 23-year-old, so you have some experience in this.

Dr. Laura: Not only do I have experience, I can see what works. I can see how they grow up. It's actually very reassuring to know that children turn out great when you parent this way.

Alissa: You have a new book coming out now called **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings**. As a mom to three, I'm so excited about this because I'm really committed to my kids having a good, loving relationship. As adults, my siblings are some of my wealth in my life. I adore having good sibling relationships, and I really want to know more about creating that good relationship with the siblings. This book is coming out May 5; you can preorder it right now. I'd like to know what inspired you to write **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings**.

Dr. Laura: I think it's my gift to parents, because it's the book I wanted when my daughter was born. My son was four already, so my children were not spaced close together, which is even harder. But even for him as a four-year-old, he panicked when she was born. He had a very hard time. He would say things like, "She can't even play with me, and that was the whole point! Why can't we just send her back? I hate her! I don't know why; I just do."

They became very close, of course, over the years, but in the beginning I didn't know how to begin to be the parent I wanted to be with him and always had been with him, which means I was responsive to his needs.

I was an emotion-coaching parent; I helped him with his feelings. Then here I was, being an attachment mom to a new baby at the same time that I had this four-year-old who was angry

and in a panic. I didn't know how to do it, and I couldn't find a book that came from the same place I did in parenting that was geared toward the sibling relationship.

Alissa: I saw you have quite a bit of a section in **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** of introducing a new baby to a family and so many different pieces that you can use in your life. That was one of the things by which I was really attracted to your writing. Even though you have a Ph.D, you're not bringing this from this cerebral place. You're bringing it from, "Here's hands-on, with your kids, what you're going to be able to do." I see that you wrote that book that you wanted that said, "Look, you're exhausted. You have two kids now. Here are some ways that you can keep being that connected parent that you want to be." I really like that.

One of the things that I wanted to ask you about today is about problem-solving and teaching kids to deal with conflict resolution. That has been a huge thing in our life. There are three personalities in the children here that are quite distinct. My kids are four, seven, and ten, so of course there's lots of space to learn about negotiation. When I was looking through **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings**, I loved that you had some simple ongoing teaching of problem-solving.

I saw the negotiation skills: teaching kids how to ask to trade things; teaching kids how to ask for teamwork ("Hey, how about you help me clean up the Legos, and then I'll help you clean up the doll clothes?"). I saw that you had quite a few ideas in negotiation skills.

Then the second thing that was really impactful in that section for me was when you talked about tattling. It said, "Tattling is a way of your children asking you to help problem-solve." In my family, this concept has been extremely helpful, because — I'm sure you're aware — tattling is very aggravating.

Having my four-year-old come to me and hearing her tattle on something ("They're not doing this the way I want them to!") and instead of looking at it as, "Just go deal with it. Stop tattling," looking at that behavior and thinking, "Rearrange these words. She is saying to me, 'I'm having a problem. I am coming to you because you can help me solve this problem.'" I started saying back to her, "Is this something you need help solving? Do you need help solving a problem?"

Sure enough, over time, her words have started changing. She will come to me and say, "I need your help solving a problem." As a parent, that feels better to listen to. "She needs my help solving a problem; better get that problem-solving head on."

Can you talk to me about the problem-solving skills? If you get this kid needing help solving a problem, what's going to happen there? What does the parent need to do when these kids are having a conflict?

Dr. Laura: There's a simple version of it, and then there's a "let's double-click on that and go into each stage of it and talk more about it." The simple way to think of it is, first of all, you have to take a deep breath and calm yourself a little bit. If you don't, you're coming from a place of being already triggered — your buttons have been pushed; you're in a state of emergency; fight, flight, or freeze — so someone looks like the enemy.

If you're in a state of fight, someone looks like the enemy, and you go into it thinking, "My four-year-old was unfairly treated by the older siblings here; they weren't fair to her," so you go in to tell them what to do, because it's a bad situation. You have to fix it; you're the parent. You step in immediately. You're the gunslinger riding into town. You pull out your guns, and you shoot everybody, and it's all better. Right? Except, of course, it isn't.

Alissa: One of my best friends — we talk about parenting a lot — calls that the danger anger syndrome, because danger and anger are so linked. When you get that mama bear sense — "My child is in danger!" — it is so hard to be a facilitator of calm negotiation because you want to fight for your child. You want to save them, and rightly so.

Thank goodness we have these chemicals and these emotions that tell us, "Save your child!" but sometimes they can come out inappropriately. Like you said, you're charging into the older kid's room, "What were you doing? Why did you do this to your sister?" Nobody wants that.

Dr. Laura: If we ask ourselves as parents, those are always the times we do things we're sorry about later, when we're in that state. It is really the first thing always before you intervene with your children -- to take a deep breath and calm yourself.

Yes, if there's violence in the moment, you won't think of doing that; you'll be between your children immediately. But that's a very tiny percentage of the time. So you almost always can calm yourself before you do it.

You were asking me, "What do you do next?" You go to the children, and you describe the problem, and you're not judging it. You're saying, "Looks like we have a problem." If you can see what the problem is, you describe it. You might ask for more information; you might not actually know what the problem is.

Maybe you see the problem. Let's say the child has come to you to say she wants your help solving the problem (or she's tattling) and you say, "Sophie, do you need help to solve that problem? Would you like me to come with you while you tell your brother and sister?" and you go with her, and then she looks at you expectantly.

I would first say, "Sophie, you can tell them," or you could announce to the big brother and sister, say their names and say, "Sophie has something she'd like to tell you." Sophie looks at

you, and you say, “You can tell them, Sophie. Go ahead; I’m right here.” Then Sophie says, “I want to play, too. I want a turn,” or whatever she says.

Then the big brother and sister say whatever they’re going to say, which is maybe sometimes, “You can’t play; it’s not your turn; you already had a turn; no, you can’t have the elephants because I’m using them,” or whatever. But at that point you have the lay of the land, and you have the problem. You don’t run in there and say, “Look, Sophie needs to play, too, guys.” You let Sophie stick up for herself, and you coach her on how to do that.

The first step in problem-solving is to calm yourself. The second step is to describe the problem, but before you can even describe the problem, sometimes the children have to say what the problem is from their perspective.

Alissa: You mentioned restating problems in the book. I know that’s been powerful in our family because sometimes in that heated moment, your child has not necessarily taken the time to calm themselves and they’re furious. It can be, “They hate me and never play with me!” You might help, “I’m hearing you say, ‘Boys, I would like to play with you; I was really excited to play.’” You’re changing the tone just a little bit. Is that what I’m getting with restating? You’re helping describe the problem in a less inflammatory way?

Dr. Laura: Definitely. You’re not judging; you’re not blaming. You’re restating so that they don’t take it so personally. When siblings are locked in a struggle, it’s personal to them. Someone’s trying to get them, to do something to them.

This way you’re restating it as, “This person wants this, and this person wants that. That’s okay.” Your whole attitude is saying, “That’s okay.” It could be a big problem — you both want to be on the couch and it’s only so big — but we can solve this problem. That’s what you’re stating by your attitude.

Alissa: Can you give me an example of this?

Dr. Laura: When you go in, and you help Sophie say what she’s saying — let’s say Devon is her older brother — and Devon says, “Sophie, you can’t play. You always knock it down. Mom, we need some time we can build things without her always knocking them down. We’re trying to get the animal zoo built here.” You say, “Hmm, so we have a big problem.”

The reason I’m saying it’s big is that you want to acknowledge. To you, it’s obvious or simple sometimes what the answer should be, but you want to acknowledge that it feels like a big problem to them and that you’re taking it seriously.

You say, “We have a big problem here. Devon is working hard with Sarah” — let’s say Sarah’s the other child — “to build the animal zoo. They’re working very hard at it, and they don’t want

it to get knocked down. Sophie, when you were in helping, Devon just said that you knocked down the monkey house, so they really don't want you to play right now. But, Devon and Sarah, did you hear what Sophie said? She really wishes she could play. She's so excited about the animal zoo you're building, and she wishes she could play. I wonder what the solution could be."

Alissa: When I hear you restate it in that nonjudgmental way, even being an outsider, even as a hypothetical situation, doesn't it sound so much more solvable when I've heard both parts of the situation?

Dr. Laura: Yes, you're right. Often, as parents, we feel completely trapped in this situation. "What are we going to do? We've got this kid who wants this and this kid who wants that, and never the twain shall meet here. I don't know how I'm going to solve this." We're in a state of emergency. When we are in that place, naturally our kids are in that place. They were in that place to begin with. That's why Sophie came to running to us. But we're not helping if we go in and we inflame the situation further. If we take the approach that I just took, we can calm the situation down a little bit. And you're right; then, all of a sudden, it's possible.

Alissa: They might be able to see the other person's feelings a little bit easier.

Dr. Laura: Yes. And it's possible that maybe there's a way to solve it now.

Alissa: Now we've described the problem non-judgmentally; we've figured out what the problem is and restated it. What happens next?

Dr. Laura: We wonder aloud. Basically, we're inviting the kids to come up with solutions. Now, we might already have an idea for a solution. Why don't they give her some blocks and let her be over across the room a little bit (where she can't inadvertently knock their thing down) and let her build the snake house or the place for the seals? Make it an exciting thing. There could be a pool for the seals to dive in.

All of a sudden, you're making it fun for her and she's involved, but she's not in their way. You solve both kids' problems. But if I were the mom in this case, I wouldn't offer that right away because I want them to practice coming up with solutions to problems. If the solution always comes from Mom, what are they learning?

Alissa: "Go get Mom! Make her come in here! Go get Dad!"

Dr. Laura: What we say is, "This is a big problem. You want this; you want that. I wonder what we could do to solve this." At this point, the first time you do this (or even the tenth time), they're going to all look at you blankly; they're not going to have any idea. I suggest that you grab a piece of paper.

When my kids were little, I had a clipboard that I kept around. I would grab this clipboard with the paper on it so that I could write solutions down. Some people do this on their phone, especially if you're out and about, but I think clipboards are better because the kids can really see, even though they can't read yet. The written word is magic to children. So they see you writing these ideas down, their ideas. You're actually valuing their ideas, so they begin to value them, too.

Alissa: You're taking them seriously.

Dr. Laura: Yes. At that point, you ask, "I wonder what we could do to solve this." In some cases (not in this one) there might be a family rule that says no name-calling or no teasing, and one of the kids will throw that out. If they don't, as the parent, you can certainly throw that in. "In our family, you know there's a rule that we don't call names, that we treat each other kindly." So you can restate rules as part of it.

The research on this is so interesting. When parents do this, children begin to restate the rules. When their brother calls them a poo-poo head, instead of yelling back, "I am not a poo-poo head, you're a poo-poo head, and you're an idiot, too!" the kid will say, "Don't call me a poo-poo head! Our family rule is we're kind, and we don't call each other names. That hurts my feelings." Can you imagine?

Alissa: You've given them a sense of safety in the family. "This is an expectation of how our family behaves, and I expect you to behave this way with me."

Dr. Laura: Yes, exactly. It's a good time to mention family rules that have some bearing on the proceedings while you're doing the solutions. The kids, after they get used to this process, will bring up the rules.

In this case, with Sophie and Devon and Sarah, there's probably no rule about inclusion because my idea for families is you don't mandate that kids play together. Sometimes older kids need to play by themselves without a younger child around. You can't mandate that, but you can certainly mandate kindness.

My rule would be, "That's okay, you don't have to play with your little sister, but you do have to treat her kindly. Can you tell her that you don't want to play with her right now because you're busy with that? If you want to, maybe there's a time you'd like to play with her later." Again, that's setting a family expectation of the way we're treating people, even if you're not making them play with each other (which I think can build resentment).

But back to these kids. They look at you blankly. You pull out your clipboard with your piece of paper or your notebook. You say, "I heard Sophie really wants to play and help you build the

animal zoo, and I heard you're very worried that she might knock things down because she did knock the monkey house down before. What could we do where you wouldn't be worried about her knocking things down but she would still get to play? Is there a solution that would take care of that and everybody could get what they need?"

Alissa: Hopefully, they'd start coming up with some ideas then.

Dr. Laura: Yes. They might be negative at first. Often Sophie will say, "I need to play! I'm going to play!" Or Devon will say, "She can't play, Mom. Sorry. She always wrecks things." It might be that. What I would say is, "Okay, so your solution is that she just can't play today, and your solution is you want to play no matter what."

Alissa: What I heard you do was restate their negative thing in the form of a solution. "Your solution is she doesn't play. She goes out in the other room, and you guys can play here."

Dr. Laura: Exactly, and you can write those things down. Now, Sophie might have a negative reaction when Devon says she can't play and you're writing down, "She just can't play today." Sophie might say, "But I want to play!" You can say, "I hear you, Sophie." You're reflecting her feelings. "I hear you, Sophie." You're acknowledging her. "I hear how much you want to play with them. This is one solution that's possible that we're writing down here. Everybody can say solutions that they think might work, and then we'll talk about all of them and we'll find one that we can all agree on." It's great, actually, to do silly ones.

Alissa: I loved that in the book. I thought, "What a fun way to spark brainstorming!" by saying some silly solutions. What a great way to lighten up the mood a little bit.

Dr. Laura: Exactly. Like, "Hey, how about if I pretend I'm the elephant, and Sophie gets to build the house around me as the elephant?" Or maybe you don't really have time to do that, but you say "How about if we build a zoo that's so big it takes over the whole house?" which is clearly ridiculous. Anything that will get them laughing, that gets them out of their angry mood. Right now they're still a little bit in a state of danger. Devon and Sarah are worried that their play is going to be completely ruined by their little sister.

Alissa: I should say this is something that we've worked on in our family, and it takes a long time to trust that this solution thing is actually going to be okay for everybody. It can take months, I definitely found, for them to go, "Oh, she's not just here to make us play with Sophie; she's actually here to help us come up with a solution."

Dr. Laura: That's so important. If, at this point, we give in to our own anxiety and we impose a solution — "Oh, come on, you guys, you can do this; let her play" — then they will not trust this, and they won't want to work things out in the future. You're right. It can take months.

It's the repeated experience of anything that shapes the brain, and it shapes our habits. If you do this for three months, you've created a new habit. I tell parents to try it for at least three months, and you'll see a huge difference.

Alissa: They come up with a solution. You've been writing them down, and finally there's one that people agree on. Honestly, what happens in my family sometimes is I think they get tired of me being there, and they finally realize, "I just don't care. Actually, I'm fine with this solution."

I don't even know sometimes that they love the solution they came up with, they just realize that I am actually going to sit there with them and we're going to come up with a solution and they just want to play. Suddenly, they become a lot more flexible with how they're going to play.

Dr. Laura: It absolutely is true, and that's okay. It really drives home that they can work things out with their sibling, and they don't have to be so stuck on their position, that sometimes for all of us the relationship is more important. "Honey, we're going to go to the movies tonight. I know you want to see that movie, and I want to see this one, but the truth is I just want to be with you. I'm okay going to your movie." We're all in that position sometimes, and it's really fine. It's not a bad thing for kids to learn that, "I can do it your way, even though that's not where I started out."

The other thing that happens, Alissa, is that they will end up compromising. Sophie will say, "But I really, really, really want to build the elephant house. That's what I want to do." And Devon will say, "You can't build the elephant house because it has to be super-tall to fit the elephants in it, but maybe you can build the monkey house. You can't make it so tall yet because you're still learning how to do it, but you can build the monkey house, but only if you build it over there, where you won't accidentally bump into anything else." So, at that point, she's like, "Okay."

She wanted to build the elephant house, but he found a way she can build something. They find a compromise sometimes when one of them offers a solution that doesn't work for the other, and then they realize they could actually work something out.

Alissa: There are those negotiation skills I was mentioning that you talk about earlier. I know that I've seen, as we work through this process, sometimes when I talk to the older child, "If you have her build the monkey house and tell her that the monkeys are allowed to have a swimming pool, and none of the other animals get that, that's kind of cool, huh?"

Then they start learning, not in a manipulative way, but realizing, "If I want this to work for everyone, I actually have to make it nice for everyone," they start learning how to invite that.

I promise, I have seen that in my family. I'm saying this to the listeners that it takes a long time, but honestly it's the coolest thing to see it start to work because you just go, "They actually are getting it! They do want to do this!"

Dr. Laura: That's part of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence has two parts. One is noticing our own emotions and being able to regulate them so we can regulate our behavior. But the second part is noticing other people's emotions and understanding what they need and want and how to work with them.

If the big brother and sister can say, "Sophie, you can't really build structures yet; they fall down. We can't let you build the elephant house. But you know what? If you build the seal enclosure, they don't need a house. They love it when it rains. You can build a pool for them; you can use the blocks to build a pool, and that's just an enclosure. You could do that, right?"

Alissa: Sophie feels good and valued.

Dr. Laura: Yes, exactly. Part one is really describing the problem. Part two is inviting them to come up with solutions, and that involve brainstorming and synthesizing. Then you've got a solution and, at that point, you're basically getting agreement from the kids. I would restate that. "I hear Devon and Sarah saying that you could build the seal enclosure." She may need a little help to understand what she's doing or what she's agreeing to. She may be a little mad still, but you can help sell her on the deal.

Obviously, you don't want to build resentment by pushing kids into something, but you certainly can sweeten the deal for her so that she ends up liking to do this and feels great about it. You're basically getting agreement from all the kids and restating what you're doing here. "So you're all three going to play together and build an animal zoo, and Sophie's job is to build the place where the seals live. You're going to build a pool. Right, Sophie? And you're going to do it over here." This is part of step four.

Step one is describing the problem, step two is inviting the solution, step three is getting the agreement, and then step four is helping them refine the solution. This is actually important. If we ignore this, they can't always do it. You might say, "How are we going to make sure that Sophie doesn't accidentally knock down the rest of the zoo? What would be a good solution for that?"

"Well, we could give her a pile of blocks over here to work with to build her seal pen."

"Great idea, Sarah. What do you think, Sophie? Would that work for you?"

"Yeah! Where are my blocks?"

“You can have all these blocks, Sophie.”

“Okay. Where are the seals?” She’s ready to roll.

Alissa: You’ve just empowered them one more time to show that they can be on the lookout for other things that are going to happen, and they can problem-solve for those, too. That’s so cool.

Dr. Laura: Exactly. If someone comes to you in 20 minutes and says, “Mom, we have a problem. It really isn’t working. I know we came up with a solution, but Sophie wants more blocks than we can give her.”

Alissa: Oh, that never happens. (laughing)

Dr. Laura: (laughing) I think it always happens, doesn’t it? It’s totally fine. It’s like world peace. One step at a time. You can go back, or you can say, “I wonder what you can do about that?” They might come up with a solution like, “Well, we could pull up the train tracks and stack them up or put them on their sides, and that could be part of how we build the fencing,” or whatever. They’ll come up with something. Kids are endlessly inventive; they just need permission and a little structure sometimes.

Alissa: As much as this takes a lot of effort on our part, isn’t this truly what parenting is about? Seeing these as opportunities to learn how to problem-solve in the bigger world. It takes practice. I’m almost 35, I have two businesses, and every single day is tons of practice at problem-solving. Of course, my four-year-old and my seven- and ten-year-old really need these opportunities to practice.

Dr. Laura: It’s not just skills for each other. It absolutely is skills for each other to have a better, more peaceful, productive, happy, affectionate sibling relationship. But it’s also skills they will use for the rest of their lives.

It would be an amazing world if everyone was raised to (A) stick up for themselves, notice their needs and wants; (B) be able to say them in a respectful way that doesn’t attack the other person; and (C) work out a solution that everybody’s happy with, with each other. Wouldn’t that be amazing? Our marriages would be a whole lot better -- our partnerships of any kind would be a whole lot better-- and also the peer relationships that children have in school would be better.

I have some letters from teachers that I’ve gotten over the years that were completely unsolicited, just nice notes from teachers about my children. One of the things that they often remarked on is that my kids could get along with everybody. Wouldn’t that be a great thing to have children feel confident that they could work things out with anybody?

Alissa: I love my family, and it is the core of my being. But isn't it also exciting to think that this work at home extends out into the world to create a more peaceful world? I love your writing, because it helps me find those day-to-day ways to put into practice what I really want to do with my children, and then to help that extend out into the world. I'm very excited to talk to you about this. Thank you so much.

Dr. Laura: It's been my pleasure.

Alissa: I love your book. If anybody would like to get this book, can you tell them about **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** and how they can find out more about stopping the fighting and raising friends for life?

Dr. Laura: It's available wherever books are sold. Right now it's on preorder; the book is actually in the bookstores on May 5, 2015. Between now and then, if you preorder the book from any source — from your local bookstore, from Amazon, from Barnes & Noble, on audio, for Kindle, for Nook, any way that you want to preorder it — if you go to my website, you can submit that receipt and get immediate access to my **Peaceful Parenting** audio course.

It normally sells for \$59. It's a very comprehensive course about how you can move from punishing to helping kids want to cooperate by using your connection with your child (connection-based parenting).

The preorder offer is available on my website, which is AhaParenting.com. If you just go to the website, there's a menu bar, click on "books" and click on the link for **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings**, and you'll find where to submit your preorder form. It also has links there to buy the book. As I said, you can buy it from any source. I went into the studio and recorded the book, so it's available on audio with me reading it and you can preorder that as well right now.

Alissa: Dr. Laura Markham of Aha Parenting, it has been an honor and a joy to talk with you. I hope we get to do it again sometime.

Dr. Laura: I look forward to it, Alissa. Thank you.

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