Erin: Hello and welcome to this week’s episode of Parenting Beyond Discipline, the place to learn about ALL things parenting and get your questions answered. I’m your host, Erin Royer-Asrilant.

For parents of more than one child, today’s episode is a must, sibling rivalry and fighting! How do we not only create more peace in the home among siblings day to day but also how do we help support the most positive relationship we can among siblings? They may or may not grow up to be best friends, but there are lots of things parents can do to set a solid foundation for strong sibling relationships, so let’s get started!

First, a couple of definitions because it is important to understand the difference between fighting and rivalry. Fighting is over things or experiences, while rivalry is over parental attention and/or affection. Once you understand this you can clearly see the difference and recognize which camp the struggle is falling into so you can handle for what it is. Assume rivalry exists. This way you aren’t caught off guard and handling the same as you would a fight.

Our oldest son, Carter, was only 20 months old when our twins were born. I was SO worried about having enough time and energy for everyone. I mean he was really only a baby still himself and I knew the twins would require a lot of care. When Chandler and Taylor were born, they were 36 weeks. Taylor was not breathing properly and had to be rushed to the NICU. So when Carter came to the hospital to visit the next day, he only met Chandler and when we came home, we were only able to bring Chandler. Taylor ended up staying in the NICU for 2 weeks. We kept wondering, what will be his reaction when he learns there is another one! I mean, we told him all along of course. But he was so young, it’s not real until you see it! But all went very smoothly. I was surprised to see only saw one incident of sibling rivalry in those first months. It was one night when my husband had come home from work and he was holding one of the babies on his lap. Carter walked up and said, “Baby off!” and pointed to the floor! He wanted the lap!

I will be talking about the ways to welcome a new baby when you’ve got older siblings in the house to help things go as smoothly as possible, in a future episode. So if you have that coming up in the near future, stay tuned for that class in a few weeks. Of
course, I also cover that information in the siblings class available on our website, if you want or need it sooner.

When I teach the class on sibling rivalry, I encourage the participants who have siblings of their own to first start by taking an inventory of their own sibling relationships and go through our worksheet. Because the relationships you have and your thoughts and feelings about them will influence how you deal with your own children's relationships. If you can make yourself aware of your thoughts and feelings, you can work to avoid repeating any patterns that you don't want to see repeated. Think about things like, where you are in the birth order? What were each of your relationships like with each of your siblings growing up? What are they like now? If you have any ill feelings towards any siblings where do they stem from? Are your relationships with your siblings what you would want? Are they what you would want for your children? What blind spots might you have when it comes to favoring once child over another, either one who is more like you in temperament or shares your same birth order?

Which is a great lead-in to my next point, recognize that favoritism exists. This can happen for three reasons as I just eluded to, you many unconsciously favor a child who shares your same spot in the birth order, because you can relate to challenges of that position. For example, if you were a first born who’s parents always expected you to share everything and your younger sibling always broke everything, you may lean heavily towards protecting your oldest. Birth order comes into play in a lot of ways.

The second way favoritism can sneak in, is a child whose temperament is either very similar to our own or requires less intervention and energy may receive favoritism over their sibling whose temperament is very different from our own or requires more intervention and energy. I consider understanding temperament one of the basics of parenting and I highly recommend watching that class on our website so you can understand all of those nuances.

Lastly, favoritism can ebb and flow between children. If one of your children is having a particularly difficult morning, day or week, is going through a defiant stage, is teething or sick, it's natural to have a preference for the child who is being less high maintenance at the time!

The important thing to keep in mind is that this has an effect on the way we parent each child. It's important to recognize it internally so we can be aware of it. Then figure out how to have the feelings and acknowledge them without letting on that we are having them. If it shows, and particularly shows as a pattern it WILL affect relationships with your children AND their relationships with each other.
Then, regardless of how you feel about your siblings, model positive sibling relationships. You don’t have love or even like your siblings. But talk positively about them, or at minimum, be neutral about your siblings around your kids. Share your negative thoughts privately with your partner or friends. Your children will learn what is acceptable by how they hear you speak about and to your siblings.

Whether you have your own siblings or not, set family goals for your children’s relationships – what do you want your children’s relationships to look like? Now? In 5, 10 years? As adults? You can shape this.

Set family rules and values around relationships. If your family is young, (5-6 and under) then the adults can do this. If they are older, let the kids be a part of this. When kids are included in these important decision making processes, they are much more likely to cooperate with the rules and ideals. Family meetings are a great way to set family rules and values.

Set your expectations first for yourself or with your partner and then with your kids. What expectations do you have for your children? We can’t expect our kids to always get along perfectly. But we can set expectations about how they treat one another, and how they handle disagreements. It is also important to take your child’s age into consideration, and what is age-appropriate so that you don’t get frustrated expecting a 2 year-old to share or a 3 year-old not to grab toys.

As you know, we have 3 children. This triangular relationship can be difficult to manage at times, as kids tend to pair off, leaving one kid feeling left out quite often. So we have a very strong rule in our house that our kids are allowed to either be alone in their rooms or allow everyone to join in play. They are, under no circumstances, allowed to exclude anyone. They began to understand this rule very well when the twins were only 3 1/2. After only a couple of months of strict enforcement, I haven’t had to intervene and coach this rule ever since. We still work with them on figuring out how and what to play, and how to compromise so that everyone can enjoy the process but they understand the importance of including everyone and this is because this is a family value that we have worked hard to shape.

I have time to cover a few of the many ways to support and strengthen sibling relationships.
Don’t compare. Steer clear of any comparisons such as, “your brother went right up to bed when I asked!” “I never have to remind your sister to clean up her room!” It’s not productive. It only makes the kid being chastised feel bad and also puts the cooperative kid in an awkward situation as well. Ultimately it is a surefire way to drive a wedge between them. Even things as benign sounding as, “Sophia is using her fork.” and then glaring at the other child as he shoves his food in his mouth with his hands, if the intention of praising one child is to get another to comply then don’t do it! If however, you notice one of your children doing something well and you just want to give a reinforcement that is fine. It may sound like a subtle difference but the kids pick up on the intention and therefore it is a big difference. “Sophia, I see you are using your fork. Thank you for using your best table manners!” Is way different than, “I see Sophia using her best table manners! I wonder if anyone else can do that?” It’s a comparison. Even though it’s not putting the one kid down, It is putting one kid up. With that being said, if you are a teacher and use this tool in the classroom, as a gentle reminder to other kids, it is fine. It’s a great tool for teachers. Pointing out a classmate who exhibits model behavior is good. Pointing out a sibling is not.

Teach relationship skills. These skills are important for ALL kids, not just those with siblings. But teaching these skills will help your kids learn how to share their needs and feelings appropriately, listen to others feelings, and negotiate with one another to problem-solve. What an amazing gift! Imagine if every adult had such awesome communication skills! I’m sure you’ve met more than your fair share of people who don’t know how to do this. Yikes!!

Teach emotional competence. Emotional competence is being upset with the right person at the right time. Rather than taking frustrations we have with one person out on someone else, or displacing feelings of anger.

Teach kids how to be upset with the right person, not to carry it over to another. Sometimes if a child comes home upset at a friend or a teacher he or she may take it out on a younger sibling because it’s easier to have control or power over a younger sibling than a peer or a teacher.

If you child had a bad day at school, allow them to talk about it and work through it, possibly even coming up with some ideas of how to handle the situation if it comes up again, rather than allowing him to take it out on a sibling.

Now for questions. Kelly in New Hampshire has a question about sibling fights. “My girls 8 and 10, seem to fight non-stop. It’s those little squabbles, it’s my turn with the
game! She's had it forever!” “No I haven’t” Literally, all. day. long. It’s driving me up a wall?! If I constantly intervene, I can’t get anything done!”

This is a common problem in many homes, Kelly. So I’m going to give you a guideline that should help in general and then some specific tools for this situation. For the general guidelines, there are 3 different categories of disagreements between kids, these are bickering, fighting and aggression. Bickering is those little squabbles just like what you are talking about “I want to play this!” “Well I want to play that!” You’ll hear it in the middle of imaginative play as they work through the play, or during games as they work out the rules, or when they are struggling with sharing and taking turns. I know it’s really hard but the best way to deal with this, is to ignore these so your kids can get practice working things through. If you always jump in, they won’t get any practice at working things out. If you find that it really annoys you, you can leave the room. If you find it is constant, you can also help your kids work on the way they address one another, teaching how to share feelings respectfully, but WITHOUT solving the problem for them. Let them work through the problem together. this goes back to what I talked about earlier, teaching relationship skills. Coach them on how to share their ideas with respectful tones. I also have a class on communication tools. Using these and modeling these and then teaching them to your kids can also help them work these things out better together. For specific ways to work on this situation, call a meeting and mediate but let them try to come to an agreement of figuring out a way or a rule for sharing that are both on board with, whether it’s with a timer or 24 hour time spans with the beloved object. If the fights are always over one specific object, a favorite shirt or an iPad, you can also sit them both down and have a talk, letting them know your expectations, at their ages, they are capable of figuring out a way to work this out and let them know this is your expectation for them. That the bickering feels constant and that it’s disruptive to the household. Then you can lay down the consequence that they need to figure out how to work together or the next time you hear them bickering then you will take it for an extended period of time, a day or two and no one gets to have it. If though, the fights are always over different things, then taking away the offending object won’t work and you’ll have to do some work on those relationship skills and coaching the girls how handle disagreements.

When you hear fighting, which is a more escalated than just bickering. But wait and listen. Don’t jump in immediately. Give them an opportunity to work it out. Just like with the bickering, sometimes your kids will work things out and you want to give them a chance to do so, so that they can build these conflict resolution skills. In our house - I can’t tell you the number of times I thought, “uh oh! I better get in there!” just to find that the moment I’m about to enter the room they magically work it out and go from yelling at each other to being totally sweet to each other!
But if it is escalating, then step in coach them through the problem solving. Ask each child about their goals and help the kids come to a resolution. Then the last category of fighting is aggression. Aggression can be either physical or verbal. Verbal is the name calling or anything said in the spirit to be hurtful. Always take these as a serious matter and intervene every single time.

Unfortunately, this is all we have time to answer today! But keep sending in these great questions! In our next episode, I’ll be covering the basics of one of the biggest struggles in modern day families, Peaceful parenting. This is always a wildly popular topic when I teach it here in town. So it’s an episode you won’t want to miss!

Thanks everyone for tuning in today. If you would like to submit a question for next week’s episode or other future episodes, you can send an email to Podcast@YourVillageOnline.com. You can also see what other topics we have coming up by visiting the page on our site, YourVillageOnline.com/Podcast. If you’re loving what you’re hearing on our podcast, please let us know by giving us a great review, and also, subscribing to our channel. If there is something you think we can do better or if there is a topic you would like to hear about, please send an email to Podcast@YourVillageOnline.com. Thanks so much everyone and I look forward to seeing you next time.