

Transcript:

Conversation between Tina Payne Bryson and Laura Markham

Dr. Laura: Hello. Thank you for joining us today. This is Dr. Laura Markham, the author of **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life**.

I'm so excited today to be able to talk with Tina Bryson Payne Bryson. She's the co-author of **No-Drama Discipline: The Whole-Brain Way to Calm the Chaos and Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind** and also the co-author of **The Whole Brain Child**. You can find Tina Bryson Bryson at TinaBrysonBryson.com.

Today, we get to talk with her about the intersection between discipline, which she wrote about in "No-Drama Discipline," and the sibling relationship. Tina Bryson, thanks so much for joining me today.

Tina Bryson: Thanks so much for connecting with me and asking me to be part of your blog tour. I'm so excited to get to chat and talk about how much exciting crossover there is and how we can help parents raise kids who thrive and have deeper, more meaningful relationships with them. I'm honored.

Dr. Laura: Thank you. When you read "**Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings**," you told me you were excited to find it because often you disagree with parenting books, but with this one you really agreed with what you were reading. What is it that struck you as you read the book?

Tina Bryson: What I loved about the approach is that it so compatible with what I'm really wanting parents to start thinking about and doing differently, which is to think about how, when kids are having a hard time, their behavior is chaotic and reactive and they're being unkind and they're not handling themselves well. I think typically, when they're not in a good state of mind that oftentimes that enters into the sibling relationship.

Really, the approach that I love so much with what you are doing in **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** is that it's about nurturing and soothing and building a relationship, and then the skill-building that comes from that place of foundation.

I think a lot of the usual framework around sibling conflict is about making it stop, which I fully understand – we want to survive those things, and those moments can be really unpleasant – but we also need to have this bigger goal of our children thriving and building relational skills.

But those relational skills and the ability for them to handle themselves well and communicate with their siblings in respectful ways and regulate their own reactivity all starts from this foundation of the relationship between the parent and the child in those moments where they're having the hardest time.

We go back to the attachment stuff, where when kids feel safe and secure and seen and soothed, when they're in their worst state, when we do that repeatedly, not only does it calm down the reactivity that's happening in the moment relationally between siblings, but it also gives them repeated experiences that allow their brain to wire up in ways that allow them to be able to soothe themselves and be able to connect in more respectful ways with their siblings.

I love that **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** is relational-based, that it's about soothing our children in these states – as that's probably when they need us the most, when they're acting the worst – and that it's about building those skills over time, which really is what discipline is. Discipline is all about skill-building and teaching.

Dr. Laura: Yes. One of the things you just said was “it's when the child is having the hardest time that they most need us,” -- but it's also that's when the parent is having the hardest time, too, right?

Tina Bryson: Yes, it is. It's so hard, isn't it? I know my worst parenting moments have been moments when I haven't regulated myself. I think what's so great about your book that I just love so much is that you really give the overall concept and this whole framework and this approach of looking at what's happening between siblings and what's happening between the parent and the child in those moments. And you also give great scripts, and the dialogues are very really authentic and realistic. I found myself really resonating with them as a mom to three boys myself.

Your scripts in **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** will give parents practical things they can do and say in the moment that allow us to be more effective in handling these difficult moments. Most of our self-regulation issues... Well, there are lots of reasons, but one of the things that happens is that we try something – our kids are starting to fall apart a little bit, the conflict is starting to build, and we try what comes instinctually or something we've read about – and if it doesn't work, things continue to escalate. That's where our self-regulation can really get pushed to its limits.

I love that in **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** you create this framework, but you give really practical and I think really effective ways to soothe and calm the chaos or the conflict instead of escalating.

I think the other piece of this, Laura, is that when we are not regulated ourselves and when our children are not regulated – and of course, there's all kinds of science for why we bounce off each other, the mirror neurons and all that gets going – what happens is when we start moving to a place where we aren't able to handle ourselves, where we're not self-regulated, we end up actually intensifying and stirring up the distress. We amplify our children's distress, and we amplify the chaos and the conflict instead of soothing it.

The other thing I really loved about your approach was that it was an approach that instead of amplifying distress, it amplified positive states and soothed negative states, and that's what we really want to be doing.

Dr. Laura: Yes. When their children are starting to fight with each other, the parent doesn't want to be amplifying the distress. But somehow we think if we can just step in, take charge, control the situation, make the kid do what we want – give the toy to the other kid, for instance – it will all be better. Of course, when what we're doing is trying to control the children, we're making things much, much worse. Whereas if we could instead stop and get ourselves calm before we step in, and accept each child's point of view, then we have a starting place to actually help them to work something out with each other.

Tina Bryson: That's right. That's where we can absolutely say yes to each child and each child can absolutely feel like we are on their side without us amplifying and creating even more competition and even more distress. But it does all start with that piece of, "Okay, how can I make everyone feel safe and secure?"

What happens is we respond in bigger ways because we feel like we're not getting anywhere, and that creates more of a sense of urgency. We use threatening tones of voice, we use angry facial expressions that communicate threat, and our body posture is demonstrating aggression and frustration. What that does is it really communicates to these reptilian brains – our own and our children's – that there is a threat happening, which causes everyone to be even more reactive.

Dr. Laura: Yes. The brain science here is that we just are trying to take control of the situation to tamp down the feelings, but instead because we're coming out of our own sense of being upset, it's making everyone else more upset and we're all moving into a place of the brain getting more and more alarmed in each of us at the moment, right?

Tina Bryson: That's right. What we're doing is we're communicating threat, and so the defense systems have to come on. All the fight-flight-freeze stuff comes on. The higher parts of the brain like the cortex that allow us to pause before action and consider all of our options and be flexible and regulate our emotions and all that, that part of the brain starts getting less energy flow.

When the brain and the nervous system detect threat and danger, the lower structures of the brain have to take over. They can hijack these higher structures that allow us to be kind, considerate, calm, and thoughtful people. The more parents amplify distress and the more we communicate threat, it's actually completely counterproductive.

The whole lens of "No-Drama Discipline" is this idea that the whole point of discipline is to teach and to build skills and that oftentimes when we're disciplining, it's already a moment when our children are falling apart. They're not in states of regulation, and we often respond in ways that make them even more reactive.

We say the brain is either in a receptive state or it's in a reactive state. Are we responding in ways that cause more reactivity, or are we doing things that help move the child into a place of receptivity? What I saw so much throughout **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** is the ways that you were supporting parents and some of the tools that you provide were helping parents move children from reactive states into more receptive states.

That's where the skill-building happens. That's where the teaching happens. That's where we work on empathy and ask "How might your brother feel based on what you just said?" and all of those things. Our kids can't get to empathy when they feel wronged or when they're in this reactive state.

When we can acknowledge their wounding and acknowledge what their internal experience is – even if it may seem silly to us – and we bring that empathy, that empathy just softens the child's reactivity. Then we can work on that skill-building piece about, "How could you talk to your brother? How could you tell him you didn't like that in a way that might feel respectful?" and all of those pieces. But it starts with making sure that our children are in a receptive state instead of a reactive one, and of course, that requires us to not be in a reactive state, as well.

The other thing you said earlier, Laura, that is so funny is that I love that you used the word "control" a couple of times, because you and I are so on the same page about this. The joke I like to make when I'm talking to groups of parents is I'll say, "I think we all feel like one of our most important jobs is to control our children so that they learn to be self-controlled.... (laughter) The problem is if you start paying attention, even in those early hours of life, you realize you actually cannot control another human being unless you're going to use physical force or you're going to use terror." If you're going to use extreme fear and physical force, you

probably can control someone, but then you're obviously going to create all kinds of trauma if you're doing that.

We start learning quickly as parents that you can't force your child to eat, you can't force him to swallow and chew and those kinds of things. You can't force them to fall asleep. You can't force them to eliminate.

We really ultimately don't have control, and so if we get into this mindset of "I have to control them," then we're setting ourselves up to not be effective as parents, which then makes us feel more reactive. It's this cycle.

When we're watching interactions between siblings, they're experimenting with their power and control and they're experimenting with "How can I make you do what I want you to do?" or "How can I get out of what you're asking me to do?"

They're playing with all of these things and if our parenting approach is one of power and control and domination and force, we're going to see that enacted in our children's interactions, as well. We're going to see it anyway in some of these interactions, but that's where the teaching comes in, but even more so if that's what we're modeling.

Dr. Laura: Yes, that really is something that most parents don't realize. They think that when they discipline, they're teaching children appropriate behavior, and if the means they use for that discipline includes the things that are most often recommended – such as timeouts or consequences – parents don't realize that will have an impact on the sibling relationship.

What you're saying is actually we're modeling for children how we solve problems. Is that right?

Tina Bryson: Absolutely. Then the other piece is that part of siblings treating each other well and getting along well is just development unfolding. I know I've been doing the chopping and hauling of skill-building with my oldest, who just turned 15, since he was little. There were conflicts between him and his two brothers more so than any other combinations.

Even though I've been doing the same kinds of things to build those skills of not stirring the pot with siblings and all that, what ended up happening was development unfolded somehow for him. In the last year, it has just become so wonderful between him and his siblings, and part of that I think is just development unfolding.

But the other piece is that discipline is all about that skill-building. When we use discipline moments as opportunities to teach, which is really what they are, then we are building those skills, and our children then manifest that in the sibling relationship.

The sibling relationship is so interesting because parents will tell me, “My kids are so vile to each other, and they don’t treat their friends that way. They know how to be nice. They just don’t.” What I say to them is, “Just like your children’s teachers tell you they’re so lovely and wonderful and yet they say a few things to you that their teacher would be surprised about probably, it’s because they know they cannot lose your love and that there’s unconditionality there.”

What happens with siblings is if they treated their friends like they treat their siblings at times, they wouldn’t have friends. There’s that same kind of attachment safety net as they know that they’re siblings no matter what, and that’s where they can experiment with how their behavior and how their reactivity impacts others and having to work it through.

If we use discipline opportunities throughout the course of our children’s childhoods, what we’re doing is we’re wiring up their brains through these repeated experiences for how to solve problems, like you said, for how to make amends, for how to regulate themselves.

We know from the brain sciences that children who have repeated experiences of being soothed and feeling safe and secure are going to have brains that are better wired to self-regulate. We can build those skills, that self-soothing capacity and that capacity to be self-disciplined, through bringing empathy at the same time that we’re setting limits. I know you’ve written quite a bit about empathic limit-setting, and I’m right along with you on all of that.

If we use empathy while still setting limits in our discipline, then our kids are going to be able to do that in all their relationships, including their siblings. They’ll be able to still advocate for themselves and talk about what they like and what they don’t like and set their own personal limits but still with empathy and respect. But it takes a long time. We have to be really, really patient as parents.

Dr. Laura: Yes. That can be hard, because as you’re going through it, you wonder, “Why don’t they do this already? How long this is going to take? Will they ever get along?” Of course, eventually they do.

What you said about your son is so great because it’s not just development; it’s also that he wanted to be there. If you had spent the last 15 years disciplining him in a way that made him more resentful of his brothers, made him feel like you were taking their side, his development would not have caught up with him now. He would be even more angry at them, because at 15, you’re starting to look outside the home for answers if you haven’t found the answers you want at home, so some kids just stop trying to get along at home. But you spent 15 years helping him feel safe and soothed and seen and valued and also helping him learn those skills, so he wants to stay connected to you and to his brothers because of the way you did it, right?

Tina Bryson: That's right. I think, too, they are going to have conflict. I know as a parent, there have been periods in my boys' lives where the conflict between them was really the most unpleasant part of parenting. I at times felt like, "Is it ever going to get better?" – that exact thing you're talking about.

But we go back to this idea about neuroplasticity. I always want to coach kids about how to respond to their parents when we as parents say really ridiculous things, like we say "Stop crying," as if they can say "Okay, I hadn't thought of that. I will just stop right this second," as if you can turn it off like that.

But we also say things like, "How many times do I have to tell you?" I sort of want to coach a six-year-old to say, "Well, according to neuroplasticity, you're going to have to tell me probably about 17,000 times." I'm making up the number, but it does take these repeated experiences.

One of the set of repeated experiences I've wanted my boys to have is – because we know there is going to be conflict – is are the positives outweighing the negatives? Am I as a parent able to promote emergent joy and laughter and silliness and lightness and a house and a home that is a haven where we all come together to refresh and renew, away from the chaos and demanding pulse of life?

When we all come together and we can even say things like, "Wow, isn't it great we can all be here together? Let's do something silly, something fun, and bring lightness," and you create these repeated experiences with our children together among the siblings where there are these shared memories of fun and laughter and silliness. When they have those, we know that over time that when they have more positive experiences over their childhood -- and not just this year, because some of you are thinking, "Oh, no we have way more negatives" -- but if your kids are three and seven, then you have to give it some time – then we know that those kids will likely grow up to have really close relationships with siblings.

As parents, we can facilitate that by being sources of joy and silliness and not taking ourselves so seriously and creating a haven. I love that in **Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings** you use a lot of this idea of playfulness and silliness and all of these things to gain cooperation, and that's really great among siblings.

I know sometimes when my boys have been fighting or whatever, if I can just do some slapstick comedy and play the boob and all of that, in the moment it can shift the dynamic where I get them teamed up to do something.

I just want to be clear that none of that is to distract them from their feelings or shutting things down, because absolutely that's super important. But sometimes we need to shift things so the

child is in a more receptive state, and then we can talk about things: “What was happening for you there?”

This isn’t about making things up and distracting them through silliness, but it’s sometimes about moving them into a more receptive state, so I can be more effective in addressing the underlying things that are really going on.

Dr. Laura: Moving them back into the more receptive state reminds me of something you said earlier that I wrote down as you were talking because I think it’s so important. You said we can say yes to each child, and I think we as parents forget that. We think that in every altercation, somehow we have to be the judge and jury and take a side. Actually, that’s not our job.

There is a way in which no matter what we are doing to facilitate the solution, we’re saying yes to each child, and every day, no matter who’s grumpy or who’s competitive, we’re saying yes to each child. I wonder if you could speak to that, since you have three boys and I’m sure you’ve seen your share of competition.

Tina Bryson: Yes, I do. I wish they played different sports, but they all love baseball and they all love basketball, so they play the same sports. Fortunately, there’s a three-year gap between each of them, so that helps, of course: the little ones expect to not beat the big ones.

That phrase is something I learned from Dan Siegel and Mary Hartzell in their book “Parenting from the Inside Out,” where they talk about saying yes to the child but maybe no to the behavior. Dan has also used the phrase “helping a child feel felt,” and I think saying yes to the child is really about, “I see you. I get it. This is what you’re experiencing. Do I have that right? I get it,” and our child knows that we have their back, that we are on their side.

Now, it doesn’t mean we are on their side against the other one. Because then we can go and talk to the other sibling, and the other sibling can have that same experience where we say, “That was really frustrating.”

Let me tell a quick story. I often tell this in my discipline talk. My 10-year-old ran into the bathroom where I was brushing my teeth and he said, “JP five-starred me.” I didn’t know this expression, but “five-starred” is where you slap someone so hard you leave five fingerprints, you leave a handprint.

I said, “Oh my goodness, are you okay?” and I checked him. He was hurt, but he was fine. Then I said, “Do you want me to stay with you, or is it okay if I go to talk to JP?” He said, “Yeah, go talk to him.” He wanted me to go address what his brother had done.

I came around the corner and JP was standing there and his muscles were tense and his teeth were gritted and he was fuming, and so I knew he was in a high-heat state of nervous system

arousal himself. He was not in control. I said, "Sweetie, I know you know it's not okay to hurt Luke, so what's going on with you? Are you okay?"

Now he's totally the perpetrator and I'm going to absolutely address what has happened here, but first I know he has stress hormones pumping through his body. I say to him, "Are you okay? What happened?" He said, "We were talking to Grandma on the phone and I started to tell the story to them about what happened the other day. Luke took over the whole story and he wouldn't let me tell it. When we got off the phone, I tried to tell him. I said 'Luke, I didn't like that. You shouldn't have jumped in. You should have let me tell the story.' He just made a face at me and ignored me, and then I just hit him." He lost the ability to control himself.

I said, "That made you so frustrated. You wanted to tell the story. You were starting and he took over and that really upset you. You were so frustrated. Is that right?" His little shoulders softened and he started to cry and he collapsed into me. Then I was able to acknowledge his woundedness and I was able to say, "Yes, I get what you're experiencing. That was so hard." So he feels sane and he feels somebody gets him. I understand and I'm on his side. I have his back here.

Then once he was more into a receptive state and his wounds had been acknowledged, I could say to him, "You really hurt Luke's back." Then his little head tilted and I can see the beginnings of that conscience bubbling up, this feeling of discomfort, and then we could talk about what you need to do to make it right and what was happening for you and how you could tell you were angry.

We could have this whole reflective dialogue about it and address the behavior. But in that circumstance, even though he was the perpetrator--and I'm using these words lightly--he was also the victim. He had been wronged and wounded by his brother.

I could say, "Yes, I'm so sorry. That was so frustrating," and I could also comfort Luke and say, "Oh, I'm so sorry you got hurt" so they both feel acknowledged by me. They both get the yes from me, and then, of course, I address the behavior.

But what's so interesting about this is usually the parents will come in, and certainly I've had my moments like this too. I see one of my kids is injured, and the mama bear in me comes up and says, "No one's going to hurt my baby even if my other baby is the one who did it." We say "You hit him. You can't do that," and we go into this reactive state. But our child is hit because they're in a reactive state and they need some soothing and comfort, as well.

This is where we look at really acknowledging each individual's experience, and then once everybody's in a receptive state after we've given empathy and connection and soothing, then we can start addressing the behavior and doing that skill-building.

Dr. Laura: That was so beautifully said and such a great guide for parents when they know a child has been hurt and they need to address it in some way. What happens to most of us is we get anxious about it and we want to teach a lesson, and so we go in and immediately start lecturing and scolding or punishing instead of connecting. The child can't take it in, and they're not motivated. Even if they could take it in, they just feel misunderstood and angry and resentful, and it worsens the sibling relationship.

Whereas what you just described, because you've said yes, because they have felt felt by you, they are able to take in the reflective conversation that you have afterwards, and in fact, they're motivated also because now they can get in touch with the fact that they do love their brother, they do want to make it better with their brother -- at that point, once they've worked the anger out by being heard. So beautiful. Thank you.

Tina Bryson: We often do this thing where we say, "Go tell your brother you're sorry" or whatever. JP doesn't feel sorry in the least bit in that moment. He was glad he did it in that moment. He thinks Luke deserved that. "I'm glad I did it. In fact, I wish I'd hit him harder. I'm not sorry at all."

When we feel wounded – and JP did; he felt wronged – when we feel wronged and no one has acknowledged how we've been wronged, we can't get to empathy. We can't get there. But once someone has given us empathy and said, "Oh, that was so tough. That was really frustrating," and we feel acknowledged, that can soften us to where we can start feeling that empathy.

I think if we want to teach our kids empathy and to go make repairs, the first thing we have to do is help them feel seen and soothed. This thing we're talking about where parents rush in and we feel like we need to address it and so we move straight to punishment or we give commands or whatever it is, I think we've all been falsely led down this path of this idea that when something happens, we have to address it immediately or they won't learn. That's all that operant conditioning and behaviorism and stuff that was mostly done on animals in the 1950s.

Timing is everything. If we really want to teach and skill-build so that we're disciplining less over time because we're building those skills in as development is unfolding, then we have to wait until our children are in a teachable state.

The way we can become really effective disciplinarians – and of course, by "disciplinarian," I mean teacher – the way we do that effectively is by first helping our children get to this receptive state, regardless of whether it's a conflict between siblings or between them and us or just something in the environment, we do this soothing piece first, we do this connecting piece first.

The way I like to say it is any one particular behavior or situation or conflict is a back burner issue, and the relationship and the soothing and connection is always the front burner issue. That means you're going to have less back burner issues over time, and that when we wait until our children are in a receptive state and they're not totally calm but they're in a place where they really can think and make decisions and all of these things, we're going to be so much more effective.

Even a two or three-year-old, we can calm them down and a little while later we can say, "Let's tell the story of what happened when it was time to get into the car today with your brother." We can tell those stories. Sometimes handling it right in the moment is the absolute worst time to do it, and it just breeds more reactivity.

The question that we wrote about in "No-Drama Discipline" is the idea of asking the question "Is my child ready to learn my new?" and the second question is "Am I ready to teach? Am I in a receptive state to do this in a good way?" and if not, it's probably better to wait.

Dr. Laura: Yes, and it brings us back full-circle to our own self-regulation where we started this conversation. That's a great note to end on, because it really does begin and end with that for us as parents. Our ability to be the parent we want to be in these moments where emotions are hot really does always come back to, "Am I ready to teach or not?"

Wonderful. Tina Bryson, thank you so much for joining me today. It's been terrific to talk with you.

Tina Bryson: Thank you so much for writing these books. They're going to be such a gift to the world. I've already recommending them like crazy, and I'm just so honored to get to partner with you in this way of helping parents feel more effective and more connected to their kids. Thank you.

Dr. Laura: Thank you. We've been talking to Tina Bryson Payne Bryson. She's the co-author of "No-Drama Discipline" and also "The Whole Brain Child," and you can find her online at Tina BrysonBryson.com.

This is Dr. Laura Markham. I'm the author of "Peaceful Parent Happy Kids" and now my new book, "Peaceful Parent, Happy Siblings: How to Stop the Fighting and Raise Friends for Life."

Thank you for joining us today!

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