

## ParentZone Pods - Episode 3: Sibling Rivalry

### **[0:00] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Welcome to ParentZone Pods at Anglicare Victoria, we've been working with parents to support their experience for over 20 years. Parenting is the toughest and most important job you'll ever have. Hi, I'm Laurie. And with me is Anita.

### **[0:13] Anita Weber**

Hi Laurie.

### **[0:14] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

And we appear in group facilitators at ParentZone. This podcast reflects our work with parents and the many conversations we have had over the years.

### **[0:28] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

ParentZone acknowledge and pay our respect to the traditional custodians of this land we are recording on today, both the Wurundjeri and the Boon wurrung people of the Kulin nations. We also pay our respects to elder's past, present, and future.

### **[0:52] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

In this podcast, we're going to be looking at sibling rivalry, because fights between siblings is a hot topic for parents, and certainly is in my home. Common issues that I find not sharing, hitting one another, being jealous of one another. So trying to get the parents attention over the other child. And also things like dobbing on each other, or not even wanting to be in the same room as the other sibling, you know, because I looked at them wrong, or whatever it might be. As a parent, there are some days where I am absolutely at the end of my rope with this. So what can I do? And Anita, can you help me?

### **[1:28] Anita Weber**

First of all, I think, you know, just take a breath. As parents, we often want to take responsibility for the problems in our families and for how our children behave. But first of all, we actually need to remain really calm, take a deep breath before you attempt to negotiate or navigate the conflict. And you know, make sure that you are actually not triggered so that you can think clearly and approach the situation from a problem solving angle, rather than taking on the responsibility and overriding or ordering the kids how to behave.

### **[2:02] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Yeah, and I think that is a really important part, especially with me and my family is that I do get triggered straightaway. I hear that fighting and I already have my backup.

### **[2:12] Anita Weber**

Possibly because of the way that sibling fights were handled by our own parents. There's some really common parenting techniques that are still talked about a lot today. So you know, making children share. If they don't share as a parent, we come in and take it away. Obviously, you can't share this today. So nobody's going to play with it. And we put up on the fridge. Those kinds of strategies, they actually reduce the ability for our kids to sort these problems out for themselves, they then lean towards that they need us to interfere every time because we haven't helped them build the skills that they need to navigate the conflict for themselves.

### **[2:51] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Yes, hence why they came running to us, you know, yelling, trying to get in there first.

**[2:55] Anita Weber**

So as the parents, we actually need to sort of create a plan for how we're going to address it, without us being the umpire. What usually happens when we walk in the room is they'll both compete for our attention to tell us what the other person has done wrong. And, you know, if there's a clear difference between the children age difference, for instance, we always expect the older to take more responsibility, the youngest might be expressing that they've been hurt, and they gain our sympathy quicker, you know, our children have learned how to navigate that attention from us. So they've created a situation where they know how we're going to approach it. And generally, it's the one with the most dramatic story wins.

**[3:40] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

So it becomes a pattern is that what you're saying?

**[3:42] Anita Weber**

It does become a pattern. And it's not fair because both children need our attention. Both children need us to help them build the skills to navigate it. Both children have feelings about it and quite typically, we only hear one side, or we side with one child over the other. And what we're actually doing is building resentment between our children. So we're actually helping the situation to recur.

**[4:07] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

So for instance, I'll go into my daughter's bedroom where they've been playing and things have, you know, gone south. How do I do this? So how do I go and not take sides? What are the sort of the key things that I need to keep in mind?

**[4:19] Anita Weber**

First thing I might do is just stand close by and listen, see and hear what's actually happening before you go in and get these accounts from each child. So just, you know, stay close, you know, maybe you don't want to be seen just yet. But listen and see what's happening. Find out what's happening for yourself so that you don't get the stories and people creating the more dramatic story and then go in and address the feelings between the two kids. Because quite often they're getting carried away with what they might be feeling about the situation. And they're not thinking clearly they're not navigating the situation really well because, you know, they might think it's unfair or they want something that jealous, they're bored or frustrated. Whatever they're feeling, it's it's getting in the way of that relationship.

**[5:04] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Okay, so I go in there and I address their feelings. So do I ask them questions? What's the next step?

**[5:10] Anita Weber**

You might ask them questions, you know, or you can tell them what you observed, describe what you're seeing, describe what you're hearing. So letting them know that you're actually aware of the problem. And your point of view is this, you're taking the emotion out of it. For them, you're saying, Well, I actually, I've heard that this was happening. Or I can sense that you're feeling this way, letting them know that you actually acknowledging their feelings, and you understand where they're coming from, they don't need to give you the full explanation. But what you're seeing is a problem between the two of them, that you're actually not involved in that. And you don't want to be involved in that. Because if you do, then you become the arbitrator every single time.

**[5:54] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

But what if say, for instance, my daughter has hurt the other child and, and really, really hurt her?

**[5:59] Anita Weber**

Now you've got two children that have actually been, they're overwhelmed with big feelings. one's been hurt. And is upset. The other one is perhaps overwhelmed with whatever she's feeling. So she's lashed out. So you've actually got two children that need your help, navigating their emotions. So you don't tell one off and ignore their feelings and then tend to the one that's hurt. And I would make the decision that the one who's lashed out is probably the one that needs your attention the most. They haven't got the skill that they needed to explain to their new sibling, what was going on for them, that they've just lashed out instead. So you know, you might separate them first, give them both equal sympathy and empathy initially, and then say, let's sort that out. And let's listen to them both, you might sooth them, calm them down. Doing so is not giving them permission to behave in the way that they have it's letting them know that you care about how they feel, you're going to get to that problem, which is hitting later on, you're actually just going to calm them down first, so that you know, you can navigate and talk to them about what's happening.

**[7:03] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

And I guess it would build resentment over time, if you are sort of constantly taking one child side. And if it happens to be the youngest. And we do hear that a lot, don't we, that you're the youngest that the the eldest will often say oh they got away with everything. So it's trying to stop that resentment from building up, which would make that rivalry worse, wouldn't it?

**[7:23] Anita Weber**

Yeah, it does. It does make it worse. But the other side of it is, if you've got a child that gets overwhelmed frequently and lashes out, and you always tell them off about that, those feelings that they're feeling those overwhelm where they feel like they can't control it, you're also telling them what they're doing is wrong, that they're bad. And they feel even worse. Yeah so if you never address that, every single time, they feel like they'll never win an argument, they never get their point across that you'll never listen to them, because you're addressing their behavior, not their feelings.

**[7:55] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

All right, so say I've done that I've gone in, and I've sort of address both of their feelings and sort of understood where they're coming from, is the next step to start trying to build these skills that they don't have,

**8:06] Anita Weber**

The very first step would be helping them repair their relationship. And that's the start of that skill building. As humans, we all make mistakes, we all make challenges, and sometimes not always, in the best way. Children, they need to learn those skills. And we overestimate how much they learn by observing. Sometimes they actually need some explicit teaching. And we actually need to guide them with that. So you know, they've been upset, we've soothed them, they calm down. Now, we actually need each child to let each other know how they felt about it. And then we also need to show our children how they can say sorry, not just the words, because we often make our kids say sorry, when they don't feel it. And we also make a child accept an apology when they don't feel it. So once again, it's another thing that breeds resentment. So yeah, we actually need to show them how can they make it up to them? If the toys been broken, how can they repair the toy? Or are they going to make a plan to save up their pocket money to replace the toy? Or if feelings are hurt, how can they show their remorse for that situation? Can they be engaged to soothe the hurt child. You know, like, I wouldn't be going in forcing apologies or forcing me to accept apologies, because that once again, increases the resentment. And sometimes we leave it at that as parents we go, oh, they said, sorry now, so that's over. It's not over. The feelings haven't been addressed, the resentments still there. And it's going to happen again and again. And the perpetrator may continue to hit and lash out because all they have to do is say sorry, without acknowledging the feelings of anyone else in the family. So we actually need to sit down and make a plan for how we're going to address that. And how are we going to teach the children the skills that they need not only to navigate that situation, but to prevent it from happening in the first place?

**[9:55] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

And I'm guessing that because often kids get very upset, you know, and that takes and quite a long time to calm down, that we're probably going to sit with that for a little while first before we jump into that sort of helping them with the skills and the problem solving. Because from my experience, I know if I tried to do that way too soon, it just wouldn't work.

**[10:14] Anita Weber**

Yeah, don't do things straightaway, give them time to calm down, give them both time to calm down. It's no good. If one's Calm down, and the other one hasn't yet. They both need to actually be calm. If they think that it's too overwhelming, if we teach them that it's okay that we can sit with them that we can help them soothe. And then after that, when everyone's calm, we might come to the table we might have a family meeting about the situation and air the grievances, and then problem solve together as a family.

**[10:44] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Exactly. And I guess the other question I had was around the behavior that they have potentially done is not really acceptable the feelings are. But say, for instance, she has scratched her sister head with sister, would it be a good idea to say, we go and we empathize. We show that we understand their feelings, but then we say something along the lines of, and it's not okay to hit.

**[11:07] Anita Weber**

Yeah. So you know, there's, there's a few things happening there, we need to separate the child from the behavior as well. So the child's not a bad person, because they lash out and scratch or hit. They're just overwhelmed with their emotion. So we need to one separate the child from the behavior, they're not always the one that hits. We also need to separate the feelings, the emotions behind the behavior. So you know, if we just address the behavior, we're not dealing with any of the other things, the child feels bad, but if we just address the feelings, the behavior may return because there's no limits or boundaries or rules set in that regard. So there's no guidance provided in regards to how we behave when we feel a certain way. And so that's a really important aspect of it. So yeah, it's okay to feel the way that you do. And when you do feel that way, instead of hittiing, we can do this this and this. Once again, it's those skill building, providing opportunities to do things in a different way. Look, children won't explore that, unless we as parents have given them that guidance, we've actually said, there's a better way to express that there's a better way to do that.

**[12:11] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Yeah, would you like to tell your sister how you're feeling?

**[12:15] Anita Weber**

And you know, you provide that opportunity, you practice it on a regular basis, so then it becomes a part of what happens, we need to sort of set up a system for our children to learn and grow and develop their skills in that regard.

**[12:29] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Alright, so my daughters are pretty good at sharing for the most part, but there are certain things that they refuse to share with each other. And that can cause lots of issues, you know, fighting pulling things off one another screaming, what are your thoughts about how I can approach this?

**[12:46] Anita Weber**

I mean, I just think, why do we make children share things? It's a really tricky subject, because there is a huge expectation that children are taught to share. And they're taught to suck up the feelings about that sharing, you know, they approach other children expecting them to share.

**[13:04] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

And we tell them all the time, don't we sharing is caring!

**[13:09] Anita Weber**

The messages adults that we send to our kids, and that's, I guess, it's the first level of cooperation that we expect to see. But we ignore all of the resentment that comes with that. Sharing is not actually caring. How often do children see adults sharing their things? Not often, I don't think I'm sorry. But if the neighbour came over to my house and said he wanted to borrow my car, the answer would be no, you know, it doesn't mean I care any less about their needs, or what's going on to them. It's just, it's my car, there's not an expectation that adults share. So you know, children who have special things, they may have saved up their pocket money to buy it, they may have received it as a birthday present after it was on their wish list for months. It's something they really cherish and love. You know, we don't expect our kids to give away their Huggies or the toys that they take to bed, but we ask them to share everything else. As parents, we can actually give them some boundaries around sharing, and we can teach them what that's like to be responsible for their own things. We might have a child that typically breaks things and we might have another one that looks after them so well.

**[14:16] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Oh, yeah, that's in my house.

**[14:21] Anita Weber**

The one that really cares about the things is afraid that the other one's going to break it. They don't want to share that item. They've got feelings about it. If we force that, and then it's broken. There's no way for them to go to talk about those feelings because we told them to do that. We expected them to do that. We ordered them to do that. They don't feel like they're going to get sympathy from us in that regard. So we're closing off that avenue for support and for them to feel like their feelings matter. And the other child that's you know, broken it, they're not invested in that item like the other person is. They just want to play with it. You know, they just want what their siblings got a bit of jealousy there maybe. And if we, if we don't teach them that they also need to have ownership of their own things, you know, maybe they don't care so much. Maybe they are really generous, you know, maybe that's just part of the nature. And that's part of who they are. But that doesn't mean we actually have to force our other child into that, you know, framework. They are who they are, and we need to accept their boundaries. And if we don't, we're teaching them their boundaries don't matter.

**[15:32] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

So what about when my children are getting along? Because I don't focus on that very often.

**[15:36] Anita Weber**

I'm sure you don't, a lot of parents, don't we feel like we're going to jinx it if we interrupt.

**[15:41] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

Oh yeah. So it's like, okay, walking on eggshells don't say anything they're getting along.

**[15:46] Anita Weber**

Yeah. Part of skill building with our children is actually letting them know that we noticed that they're using those skills that were that we see that they're doing it right, they need the feedback, they need positive feedback that they're getting it right, and they're doing the right thing. So when we do see them cooperating when we do hear them problem solving together, and working out a way to solve the conflict, we actually need to let them know we noticed, you know, they're getting along and we enjoy it.

**[16:13] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

And are they noticing it, too, you know, are they actually noticing the difference?

**[16:17] Anita Weber**

When things are going really well, as I said, we don't want to jinx it, but we actually need to let them know that we notice it. So let them know that we appreciate the efforts that they're going to cooperate. And that we notice that they're building those skills and that ability to wait their turn to share.

**[16:33] Laurie-lee Arrowsmith**

In this podcast, we looked at sibling rivalry, and the issues that surround it for parents and children alike. We looked at how we can sort of enter the situation in a calm state. So, how we regulate ourselves first, and then how we don't take sides. We just tell them what we observe. We deal with their feelings, each child separately without becoming the referee. And then the next step is how we slowly teach them over time to build those skills so that they can do the stuff themselves. So the problem solving. If you feel this is hitting home for you, and you'd like to have more information about the groups that we run at parents own Google Anglicare parents zone for more information, or check the show notes where you are listening now.