



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 11: Building Sibling Relationships

Guest: Alma Villarreal

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Two or more kids? This episode is for you. We're talking about ways to build strong relationships between siblings, how to manage competition, sibling rivalry, and much more.

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen *Welcome back to The Growing Brain. Our guest today is Alma Villareal. Alma is a parent educator at Momentous Institute, which means she's out in the community, leading parenting classes and working a lot with parents. She's also a mom to a 30-year-old son and 11 and 12-year-old daughters. Thank you so much for being here today, Alma.*

Alma Thank you, Maureen.

Maureen *Today, we are talking about siblings. So this episode is for anyone who has, you know, more than one kid or is considering bringing another kid into their family. And we're going to talk a lot about, um, how to sort of manage that, those sibling relationships in a way that they are positive and constructive. And of course, we know that when we foster these relationships and if we do a really good job with, uh, raising siblings, that those, those bonds can be so important and powerful, that those kids who grew up in the same home can be friends for life and share this really intimate experience that no one else can ever really understand. So, um, there's a lot of potential here and, um, a lot of ways that we can really build those relationships. So I'm excited to dive in.*

Alma Yes, definitely. That sounds good.

Maureen *So before we talk about siblings, I think there's some foundational stuff that we should be thinking about in terms of how we, um, just some of the early relationships that we form with our kids. So what are some of the things that we should be thinking about just from a very foundational standpoint?*

Alma So I think just realizing that these early relationships are going to have a big impact in their future relationships and the way that they even relate to other adults, coworkers, friends, you know, and it's going to play a big role in how they learn those abilities to relate to others or social skills, conflict resolutions, um, ways to manage competitions in life and, and things like that. So those are some of the skills that they're learning right now as kids. And, and definitely, like you said, the way that we foster those relationships is, are going to have a big impact in the future with them.

Maureen *Yeah. So let's, let's start at the beginning here. Um, let's talk about the first time that a new sibling is brought into the family and I just want to say that we're going to do a separate episode on blended families. So two people who already have children who then join into like a romantic relationship, we'll talk about that in another episode. So today I'm talking about, um, new siblings either by birth or adoption. So let's say you're bringing a new child into your family. What are some things that you might say to your child to help prepare them for that?*

Alma Yeah. So that's a great one. And whether it's through, um, pregnancy or adoption, I think introducing these ideas and being, making our kids a part of the whole process, you know, during pregnancy or during the adoption process involving them and kind of letting them know what the plans are and what's happening and kind of, uh, really highlighting their importance in this relationship. A lot of times we tend to focus on ourselves, like I'm having a new baby or we're having a baby, but like, introducing what is their role in this new sibling? So saying things like, hey, you know, you're going to be a big brother, a big sister, you know, and this is what's happening. And this is, um, kind of like keeping them, you know, in the process of either growing a baby, you know, or we're in this process of adopting a baby and talking to them about that. If they're younger siblings, I always tell parents to use books, to kind of process some of those things, you know, just there's so many books now about big brother, big sister, you know, and kinda reading books like that helps them kind of prepare for this new, new baby or new child is going to be coming into the family.

And kids tend to, you know, process things differently. So maybe through reading through art, drawing pictures, just kind of keeping those conversations, I think, open and allowing them to talk about what they're feeling or thinking and, um, listening and answering those questions is really important.

Maureen *That's good. I, you know, we definitely did the books when we brought our babies home and, and then the books helped me think of things I wouldn't have thought to prepare my kids for. So we talked about, you know, the book talked about the baby crying all the time and I was like, oh yeah, that's good. I should prepare them the baby cries a lot. You know, I just hadn't thought about that they would want to know why is a baby crying all the time and even those little things can be distressing to kids, you know? And, and so preparing them for all the, just as much detail as you can think about that they might need to know about a new baby definitely seems like it was helpful for my kids at least.*

Alma Yes, for sure. And I think, you know, that's a great point that you made about, you read the books before you read them to the kids. And if, if we know once we read the book,

we're able to kind of think about, okay, how can I use this to, you know, prepare my child? How can I use these ideas? Or that's a good point.

I think even like the process of, um, that we go through as women, you know, and during pregnancy can be scary for our kids, you know, it can be emotional for them as well. And so I think, you know, reassuring them that mommy's doing good, mommy's healthy, you know, my, um, my body's changing because it's preparing for this, baby's growing and, you know, kind of things like that, just bringing them a lot of security and safety can help with a lot of those emotions that can take place during pregnancy.

And definitely like during the birth process as well, because that can be also a scary moment for our kids. Kind of like wondering, is mommy okay? Is she hurting? You know, they're going to be watching us, um, you know, moving slower, resting more, sleeping more, being in the hospital can also be scary...

Maureen *Right! Staying away from the house, yeah.*

Alma Yeah, and so, you know, kind of like just reassuring them a little bit, you know, mommy's okay. I'm just a little tired, you know, and, um, you know, getting my energy back, but definitely trying to connect with them in those little moments and just reassuring them can also help with some of the emotions or some of the behaviors that come and result in kids not feeling safe or being worried about us.

Maureen *Yeah. That's really good. And so when the new baby comes home from the hospital and you have this new crying, little bundle of joy, um, what advice do you have for parents about just sort of those first hours days, weeks with a new baby in the house?*

Alma It's really important for kids to meet each other, introducing the new sibling as early as possible. I know a lot of hospitals have a family room where, you know, mom and dad come in and are able to kind of like introduce the sibling to the other ones and that in that room in a very intimate kind of way. And they get to know each other and that's when the bonding, you know, begins and they might start asking questions or getting, you know, a little scared if they hear the baby crying. And again, you know, that reassurance on our behalf of no he's okay. Babies cry when they're hungry or where they're sleepy and, you know, babies, that's the way they communicate. And so he's going to be communicating to us what his needs are when he cries. And just, you know, giving them that little bit of information, I think helps them not to be afraid of the baby or, you know, a lot of times I've seen siblings hold a new baby and then they get scared, you know, like the baby starts crying and they think, oh, he doesn't like me or, or I'm not doing good, you know, and just kinda reassuring them, that's the only way that they have to talk and communicate. We use our voices and our words, but that's the only way that babies know how to let us know when they need something. Oh, he's just hungry. And you know, he's, he's sleepy or let's change his diaper, things like that. Help them kind of understand the development that the baby's going through as well.

Maureen *That's good. And in my experience, another thing that I would add to that is sort of managing my own expectations around what my kid is interested in about the new baby and what they're not interested in. I mean, at the end of the day, they're still a kid or a*

toddler or whatever age they are. And so sometimes, you know, I, I think I expected that they would want to hold the baby and have this intimate moment, and then like they lost interest after about 30 seconds when they wanted to show me their truck or whatever, you know, um, so just managing those expectations too.

Alma Yeah, definitely. And, and they do, you know, they, their brain is so, you know, moving constantly learning and moving from place to place and losing interest in, you know, and things just like they do with a toy, you know, any baby, it's kind of like, okay, I'm over you, you do something else. And so, you know, and then they want, you know, of course our attention and that's how they were able to kind of voice it. Okay. Let me show you this, you know, let's not talk about the baby anymore, you know? And so I think just being aware of those kinds of cues that they give us, like you watch their body, you know, lose interest or move on or changing the subject. And then we have to kind of refocus our attention on what they're, what they're kind of wanting to let us know and how much they want to know.

And I think, you know, in general, just making like little phrases along the, you know, the day that routine like, oh, it's time for us to do this. Or, you know, it's time for us to do, you know, we'll go to the park when dad gets home or we'll, you know, I'll read you your book as soon as, you know, put the baby to sleep and just kind of letting them know, you know, that these are things that the ways that we are managing, you know, having more than one more than one child and, you know, being flexible and things like that.

Maureen *Yeah. And that reminds me of a funny story. I went, after my second kid was born, my... I was holding her and my son wanted me to carry him down the stairs. And I said, I can't carry you down the stairs cause I'm holding the baby. And he said, put it down. Like it was most obvious thing like put the baby down and hold me. I mean, that's the idea. They don't have the context that we have that, of course you can't just put a baby down on the floor at the top of the stairs. Um, so just that idea of they'e... they just don't understand what we know. So I love your idea. Your point about narrating what you're doing so they can kind of be clued into what we're doing.*

Alma I think responding with empathy in those situations, you know, what, what does he really want? He just wants me to focus on, you know, my attention on him and he's ready for me to put this baby down. And so, you know, just saying, reflecting, you know that to them and saying, you know, so you're ready, you know, for mommy to, you know, I know you're ready for mommy to spend time with you.

So, um, let me walk and, and, and put the baby down on the swing or let me do this and then I'll be able to, you know, give you, uh, spend time with you or play with or whatever is it that they wanted.

Maureen *Yeah. One of our old colleagues, um, Lety gave me some advice after I had my second baby and said, when you have friends come over to visit you and hold the baby, tell them in advance, first, I want you to pay attention to the toddler and talk to him about things that are not related to the baby. So when you come into my house, the baby will still be there after 10 minutes. You don't need to go straight to the baby. That's just a*

baby. She's sleeping. Um, go to the toddler and ask him, you know, about what toys he's playing with or what he's interested in, um, because they get so consumed there. They have other interests besides the baby, but it feels like everything around them is about the baby. So I loved that advice. That was really helpful.

Alma Yeah. It definitely starts feeling like that. Like, you know, the baby hasn't even gotten here and he's already got so much stuff and it's just seems like baby stuff all over the house. And so I think I also, you know, recommend to parents or give them ideas that when you're visiting a new baby, you know, if there's other little siblings around, maybe, you know, if you're bringing a gift, maybe bring something for the siblings, you know, like, uh, you know, a small gift, a book, or, you know, something that lets them know that you're celebrating them as well and their role in this process, or bringing a balloon and saying like, hey, congratulations, you're a brother. You know, like, you know, things like that to make them feel, you know, special and feel a part of the, uh, baby without, you know, making it seem like the whole attention is just surrounding the baby. And that they're also a part of this, you know.

Maureen *I love that. And you said something earlier that I want to go back to, you said, um, we can go to the park when dad gets home, or we can do this. Um, and the way you said it made me think, uh, I know I'm guilty of this, but I'm trying not to blame the baby for things. So I know I'm guilty of like, like I just, the example I just gave, I can't hold you, I'm holding the baby or we can't go to the park, the baby is sleeping. Um, instead the way you said it was, we can go to the park when dad gets home or I will play with you as soon as I set the baby down. Um, and I know that's subtle, but it sets up, it can set the baby up for resentment. It can say like that stupid baby's always getting in my way.*

Alma Yeah, definitely. It starts right there with, um, and you know, I know we're going to talk about ways that as parents, you know, we can either, you know, um, build, you know, healthy relationships and healthy, you know, things with our kids, but when you think about it, it's like everything becomes about that baby. And a lot of times, you know, unaware of, you know, what we're doing, we say things like, I can't do that. You know, I have a baby or, um, you know, I have to do this for the baby and everything kind of starts, you know, feeling like everything's about that baby. And that creates... that starts to create that rivalry, that conflict does, you know, those things that we don't want to harbor, right. And so, you know, saying things like, you know, hey, you know, we're going to, or dad's going to take you to the park as soon as, you know, he gets home or today I'm going to read with you while you take a bath or, you know, things like that. Just kind of letting them know that I'm still, you know, paying attention to you. I'm still working with you and, you know, not blaming things on the baby. And sometimes we do that unconsciously it, you know, so having that awareness is definitely important.

Maureen *Definitely. So let's fast forward a little bit. And, um, you know, you have three kids. I have three kids. Any parent with two or more kids can attest to the fact that no kids are the same. So once your kids start to get older and they develop personalities, you realize, oh, they're all really different from each other. Um, and, you start to see sort of some of their strengths and then some of the areas that are harder or challenging for them. And what advice do you have for parents about how to support each child's unique needs? And then also what about when they're opposite of each other? So if one*

child is very gifted musically and the other one can't hold a tune, or one child is really strong at math and the other one needs a tutor, you know? So how do, how do you kind of build up each child's unique strengths without, especially when they're in conflict with their siblings?

Alma Well, I think, you know, keep in mind that in life we're all different and we all have strengths and you know, different weaknesses and strengths ourselves. And so, you know, and in general, you know, humans, you know, might, you know, there might be people that are good at music and people that are good at math and, you know, people that take an interest in sports and people who don't. And so, you know, just keeping that in mind, you know, that that's, you know, that's how life is. I think, you know, one of the things that we do sometimes is that we lock kids into an interest that they might have, you know, and saying, like declaring them the... you know, he's so good at music or he's my piano player, or, you know, or she's my little ballerina and those kind of, you know, uh, things that we say, those messages, you know, kind of makes him feel like, okay, you know, I have this in one thing to do where I'm good at this one thing, you know, instead of kind of like allowing them to explore different things that they might also enjoy.

That's one thing, um, another thing, you know, to, to answer your question, it's like, I'm not comparing them necessarily, but just, uh, accepting each one of them for their unique, you know, who, who they are, you know, who is this little person. And, and I think even before they start growing up, you know, you start seeing at the very beginning, you know, that kids are different, you know, they're, they don't respond to the same things. They don't, they're not interested in the same things. They're forming their own kind of personalities and personalities are formed and developed with the experiences that we have, you know, so kind of like, again, you know, those early experiences that they're going to have with the parents and how we relate to them is going to be a big deal. So I think just kind of like being aware of that, you know, it can create a lot of, um, understanding towards it. Okay. What am I, what am I saying? What am I doing? You know, that, am I paying too much attention to this, you know, particular activity or this strength that my child has and kind of neglecting the other one, you know, allowing them to be individuals is a big part of it. And just finding themselves in that.

Maureen *Yeah. I like what you said about not putting them in a box. I can totally see what you mean by that. Like, if this is my little ballerina and then what if she doesn't want to, she just like ballet after a year, you know?*

Alma Um, and that happens a lot with kids. I think, you know, without realizing again, you know, we see a strength that we see that they're great at something, you know, like music or sport, you know, for instance. And so we tend to declare them in that role, you know, and in even when they lose interest or maybe, you know, like, yeah, I was great at soccer, but I'm done with that. Like, I don't want to do that anymore. And they're, you know, ready to move on to another activity. A lot of times as parents, if we put that pressure on them, like, you know, oh, you know, Bobby, he's so good at soccer and he's just amazing. And I love going to his games and, you know, they watch, you know how we respond and react to them in that role. And so then, you know, if they have other

interests, they might be afraid to actually explore them because they're like, oh, well, my mommy, it really makes her happy when I play soccer. So I guess I'll do this. Or it really makes her, you know, proud when I'm playing the piano. So even though I don't want to play the piano, I'm just going to do it to make her happy, you know? And so getting that self identity, um, you know, that we're trying to form what happens then. .

Maureen *Yeah, yeah, oh, that's good. That made me cringe. Like you don't want your kids to do things because you as an adult, like them to do those, right.*

Alma Yeah. And I think, you know, because it's normal for them to always, they always have this instinct to make us proud and to make us happy. That's what they really want. And so when they see, you know, it's okay to give them praise and what they're doing, but also allowing them to have a balance of, you know, hey, you know, there's this art show or do you, you know, do you want to uh, let's go listen to this choir, you know, just exposing them to different things and letting them know that it's okay for them to explore other areas is always, you know, important. I think you know, help us, you know, take those reflections, you know, ourselves and think is, you know, it's a big deal.

Maureen *Yeah. Um, so let's talk a little bit about competition. I know. Um, you're giggling, I'm sure you've seen it. Um, I know competition definitely seems to bubble up, especially when kids are close in age to each other or when they're the same gender, it seems like you see a lot more of it or they're part of the same social circle. So what advice do you have for parents who are starting to see competition between siblings?*

Alma So competition is a part of life, right. We are all, we are all competitive in one way or another, in one thing or another. Um, I see competition come out all the time at work or, you know, or we see it in political debates or in sports, you know, life is competitive sometimes. And so preparing our kids for that. Thinking about that. Okay. You know, this competition is, you know, sometimes it's annoying to us as parents to kind of deal with because it's like, you know, you get it, but then it's like, they're constantly competing, you know? And they're constantly competing for our attention and our time and kind of like discovering their role in this, in these situations. And so I think, you know, one of the things that we do sometimes is that, without again, having that awareness, we tend to give attention to one particular area in our kids, um, strengths, or, you know, like maybe if they're a very organized child, you know, their room is always tidy and clean. We ourselves can create something there sometimes by saying things like, oh, look, Mary is so, you know, organized, she... her rooms are always clean and you know, and we, a lot of times, without having that awareness, we, we start being competitive, you know, at home, we start putting them in those, in those situations, you know? Okay. Well, she's getting all the attention because she's good at this and I'm not. So what can I do to now get attention? And you know, of course, as adults, we learn how to manage and how to not let those emotions, you know, come out sometimes, you know, but with kids, it's like, what are, where are we going to see? We're going to see, uh, misbehaviors, we're going to see, uh, tantrums. We're going to see just emotions that pop out, because basically they're trying to get someone's attention and that competitive nature, especially I think with kids who are very close in age, it happens frequently, we notice it a lot. My, my girls are 14 months apart. And so they compete all the time, you know, for, for our attention or for different things. And

so, but you also notice it with, with kids regardless of the age gap, for instance, with my son, because he was an only son for so long, he was used to having things and having all my attention. And so when the girls were born, it was kind of like a little bit of competition too like, you know, hey look what I'm doing. Or I got, you know, letting me know, you know, some of the things that he was accomplishing just that was aware of, okay. He wants to make sure that I still acknowledge his role or his presence and things like that. So kind of like realizing that I think helps us, you know, have a little bit more empathy for what they're doing and, and why it's happening and how we can show them how to be, um, how to manage competition and how to deal with things like that in their life, as it, as they become adults.

Maureen *Yeah. You said a couple of good things. I mean, everything you're saying is good, but two things stood out to me about that answer. One is thinking about competition as positive and setting them up for future success. That's a good reframe for sure. I know you said as parents, sometimes you just want to shut down the competition, like stop fighting over things or competing. Um, but that that's a skill that they're working on. So I really liked that. And then the other is just about how, um, competitions really... uh, really about what are they competing for and it's often for our attention. Um, so that's good to think about, it's less about, you know, who has the tidier room or who's better at that. That's really not the root of what they're usually competing about.*

Alma *Yeah. There's always, uh, an, uh, you know, we call it chasing the why you know, there's always a reason why they're competing and just kind of taking a few moments to reflect on, okay, what was it that they were really competing, you know, and, and it helps us, you know, even if in the moment we react a complete different way, but I think, you know, when we're able to reflect on what, what it was, you know, what it might, what emotions were behind that, then we can kind of empathize and learn other ways that we can handle it, you know, the next time. And so as parents, we're learning as well.*

Maureen *Yeah, definitely. Um, so I don't know about you, but I have never met a family, including my own, where siblings don't sometimes fight with each other.*

Alma *Absolutely.*

Maureen *It seems sort of inevitable that there's going to be conflict between siblings. They share so much time and space together, and the relationship is so intimate. Um, so we know that there's going to be conflict, but what are some things that we can do to sort of avoid some of the conflict?*

Alma *Yeah. So that definitely what you said, you know, they're cohabitating, they're together the majority of the time, they're sharing this, your parents, and so they're competing in a lot of times for that, you know, as well. And that creates conflict, you know, because we kind of expect them to just share everything and be okay with that. And so I always ask adults to think about when... ways that when they had to share when they had to do, you know, something and that made them feel like, okay, this is a conflict, whether it's at work or in high school, or, you know, in different areas of your life. And so thinking about conflict in that way and how, you know, the, again, the lesson is conflict resolution, how to resolve those conflicts in the future in a healthy way, how to express,*

you know, ourselves and manage ourselves in, in life. And so one of the things that they're learning a lot is through us. So how do we, you know, I always tell parents take a little bit of time to self-reflect and see how you deal with conflict. How do you deal with conflict when it happens? And so, for instance, if it's with your husband, you know, and, and there's, you know, again, you're cohabitating and there's conflict and there's, you know, things that we do that are, you know, we both do that are annoying and how do we deal with that? You know? And so when we think about it, you know, if we respond to conflict by yelling, or by always being right and don't, you know, come to like a middle ground. Kids are imitating that. And so they learn to imitate our behaviors and our relationships as well. So what are we, how we, you know, dealing with conflict ourselves in our relationships in life.

And I think just talking about it, you know, or letting them hear healthy discussions, you know, between, you know, your partner, you know, um, like, you know, sometimes we're not gonna agree, like I said on, on everything. So saying things like, okay, let's just agree to disagree and can we move on? And so, you know, when you use that phrase with them, then it's familiar because you just used it with dad, you know? And so when you say, okay, you know, it looks like we can agree on let's just, you know, agree to disagree on that one. And let's go ahead and move on to another, another thing or another activity, you know? Um, thinking a lot about that I think, you know, helps us kind of have that empathy for them to know, you know, what will you expect them a lot of times, um, again, unaware we might buy a toy, like, and bring it home and say, okay, this is for both of you, you know, both of you share this or, you know, we ask them to share so many things and that creates conflict and it's kinda like I tell moms, okay. Would you like to share your purse with me? You know, do you want to share your makeup with me? They're like, no. In life, you know, that's gonna, that's gonna, uh, create a conflict if I go up to you at, at work and just say, you know, I, hey, I went in your purse and borrowed some lotion and you're going to say, well, wait a minute. That's, you know, that's not okay. You know?

One rule that I always tell parents to think about and consider is I, the way that I explain it, it's the rule of respect and what does respect mean? You know? And so it can mean, you know, three things and that kind of divide it for kids in these three different ways.

One, uh, one of the first thing is when we cause injury to someone by physical, physical injury, you know, when we push or shove or hit, you know, we're going to see that with siblings. And so, um, what does that look like in future? As adults, you know, if you do that and if that's the way that you resolve conflict, you're going to have problems, serious problems in life, you know. When you go to school or, you know, and things like that, the consequences are just going to get bigger. And so teaching them, you know, that it's not okay to, you know, to hit or to push to shove, you know? So that's the first, you know, uh, when we identify respect and okay, physical and, you know, you give examples of ways. And I use, I usually use pictures of, you know, things like even, you know, they might say things like I didn't hit her. Yeah but you threw the remote, you know, at her. And so, you know, that's also physical.

Um, the second part is verbal. You know, and so when we insult someone verbally, you know, we, of course, as kids, as siblings, you call your brother dumb or, you know, you're, you're, you know, this or that, you know, whatever...

Maureen *You're not my best friend. You can't come to my birthday party. These are the ones I hear in my house...*

Alma Yeah, you know, so you hear those, you know, verbal kind of things, as you know, early on with them, you know, And so what does that look like? You know, what, how does that start to develop? And when we hear things like that, you know, we have to kind of like remind them, okay, this is the family rule, you know? And, and, and, and that's one of them, you know?

And so the... that's the second one, verbal, and then the third one is kind of like damaging other people's things or getting, you know, intrusive with their property or their, their stuff, things that belong to them. And so kind of like the way I explain it is, again, you know, if you go into your big sister's bedroom and you take her makeup and just, you know, decide to draw on the wall with it. That's an intrusion, you know, of her, of her things and that's not being respectful of her, of her things. In life, what does that look like? You know, when we damage someone else's property, if you're backing up and you accidentally hit a car, what's going to happen, you're going to have to face that consequence as an adult.

And so breaking them off into these three categories. And explaining, you know, and, and with younger kids, especially I like to make these rules kind of like in writing with pictures and posting up and posting them up in a room of the house where they can see them. And, you know, then, you know, that's the rule, you know, we don't hurt someone physically, verbally, or by, you know, destroying their property or, you know, breaking their toys or, you know, whatever the age ages. And so then we break that down into what is the consequence, because remember rules have to have a consequence. And so, you know, it could be like with younger kids, I try to use it like, um, because they visualize things like the, the stoplights. And so, you know, uh, green, when we see things again, we want to praise the good things that they do. So we want to, when we see things, positive things that are happening, we can say, hey, that's a green light. You're sharing with your brother. You know, you're doing this, keep it going. Right. Green means go.

Yellow. Uh, you know, let's, you know, let's think about what we're doing. Let's slow down. And so when we use yellow, we say, okay, you know, guys, it's yellow, you know, we're in the yellow zone right now, and we need to think about what we're saying and what we're doing. Let's take a little time out. Let's, you know, separate, you know, kind of like giving them that opportunity to cool down at yellow. When things escalate to red and they can get, and then remember they can go from green to red, you know? And so when they escalate to red, it's kind of like saying, okay guys, you know, now you've pushed or hit or, you know, broke someone's toy or called them an ugly name. Now it's time for us to think about what we've done and, you know, let them first, you know, kind of like calm down. Like we say, at Momentous, you know, maybe giving them a few minutes to actually, you know, calm down and think clearly when they're

okay, when they're feeling safe again. And they're feeling like, okay, you know, now I can think a little bit more. The, the, the consequence, and one of the consequences that I use with my girls is to say, if you said a bad word or a mean word about your sister, now let's think about a nice word to say about her.

And I use post-it notes, you know, to kind of, you know, have them work on that. And so if you said, you know, Um, Mia, you're dumb, you know, okay let's think about something nice that we can say about Mia. And you're going to get resistance, you know, from your siblings. It's not just going to go really well. No, it's going to go, like I don't have anything nice to say about her. You know, I can't think of anything that I want to say. There's nothing good to say about her and, you know, just process this with them one-on-one and say, okay, you know, it's okay if you want to take your time and think about something, um, and you know, take as long as you want to write a nice word. But you won't be able to play the video game until, you know, or whatever they were playing or whatever they were interested until you're able to write a nice word. So that'll kind of help them think, okay. I better say something, you know, and, and, you know, one of the things that I started noticing with these post-its was that my oldest daughter wasn't giving a lot of compliments to the, to the younger one, you know? And so when she started doing the post-it notes, it's like the little one was taking the notes of, you know, kind words that she was hearing her sister say. And I think, you know, words have a special meaning to us when we know when you get a post-it note that says, hey, Maureen, have a good day. Or, you know, you, you look at it and you kind of smile, you know? And so that, um, one day I discovered that my youngest daughter was putting those post-it notes behind her closet door. She was saving all of them, you know, and I opened the door and I saw them. And so I called her sister and I said, look, you know, these words mean so much to her and she's keeping them all here so that she can hear you say these kinds of things about her. And of course, you know, she kinda just rolled her eyes, but you know, it, it does impact them, even if you don't see, you know, even if they don't show it, you know, there, it does make them think about, okay, you know, my words do mean something to her. And so, you know, just, you know, those little tiny things, you know, can help manage some of those sibling fights and, you know, things that can happen.

Maureen *I love that.*

Alma Um, and you know, just little things, little bitty things that doesn't have to be an extreme consequence. It could just be, you know, okay. Let's, you know, a lot of parents make them hug it out in the moment. And again, when our emotions are high and we're still angry, you know, it doesn't, you know, it doesn't feel right or it doesn't come across the goal that we were trying to reach is not happening. Or you might say something like, tell her you're sorry...

Maureen *Go say sorry, yeah. I was just going so say that.*

Alma That's just like, you know, their first thing, like say, say, you're sorry. And so they go up and they're like, "Sorry!". Well, that didn't sound sincere, you know, you know, go to time out or go, you know, until you're able to think about it.

And so again, you know, thinking about, okay, they're, you know, they're still angry, they're still upset at this moment. Let me let them calm down first and then, you know, say, hey, you know what that word that you use? Was that not a nice word? Let's think about a nice word that we can say, you know and kind of let them process that.

And I think that's a good way that we as adults, also, you know, when we were resolving, you know, conflicts with someone, when we write up, you know, a note and say, hey, you know, I'm sorry that I, you know, was grouchy this morning and you know, or, you know, things like that, you know, how do we resolve our conflicts as adults and so that, you know, I think those ways that we resolve them are also being mirrored by them and imitated by them.

Maureen *That's so great. And another thought I had while you're talking is, um, one thing that I try and do when it's manageable conflict, so not when it's gotten all the way to red, but when it's in that yellow zone, like you were describing, is I try and give them the skills to work it out themselves. So a lot of times, and my kids are younger than yours, but they'll come to me and they'll say she stole my thing or, you know, whatever thing they're fighting about. And I just say, go back and work it out. Like I don't need to be involved unless it gets to... and some things, one thing we talked about is this a big problem or a small problem. And if they say big, they always say big problem because everything feels like a big problem. And I say, okay, so let me remind you. Big problems are ones that I need to call a doctor. Something is broken. Someone is really hurt. Um, you know, like kind of lay out big problem means really big problem. Like I need to call the doctor or somebody's really... Um, and they're like, Oh no, no, no, it's a small problem.*

Alma So, you know, because a lot of times we tend to use a lot of phrases and a lot, you know, big, you know, big talks with them. One word that, you know, can identify big and small is big: danger, is someone in danger, you know, hold on. Is someone in danger?

Maureen *That's good.*

Alma Yeah. And then they're able to go, no, they're just not brushing their teeth. She's not doing their homework. You know, the usual tattles, you know, stories until we are able to divide between danger or...

Maureen *Oh, that's good. That's helpful.*

Alma And so, you know, small things, you know, small things, you know, brushing teeth, not doing her homework, she pushed me, she touched me. She, you know, all these things, you know, those are small things that you guys can work out.

Maureen *And then I send them back, when it's a small problem, I say, great. Then go work it out. I don't need to be involved. Um, and they get really mad at me, you know, like, but she took my thing... and I'm like, why don't you tell her about it? Why don't you tell her how you feel about it? Um, and that, that comes up a lot. They're quick to run to me and then I just send them back to work it out. So that's something that we're trying to build*

that skill that they can work through their own problems without needing me as they get older.

Alma Right. And it's easy for us to fall into that referee role. And they're putting a, you know, constantly trying to bring us into, you know, to say, for you to decide who was wrong and who was right. And there's never, that's never going to be, that's never going to be the case. And so kind of like staying away from that referee role, you know, and saying, okay, you know, you guys can work this out or, or if they come and tattle things like he's not doing his homework or he's watching TV, or he's still on his phone, you know, things like that. Hey, let me worry about that. You know, those are small things. Let me worry about that. Let me deal with that, you know, but you're not doing anything and she's still doing it there. You know, you know, that's, you know, between me and him, you know, let us worry about that. You don't have to worry about that.

Maureen *Those issues of justice seem really big. They're really, really big into, but they're not doing what they're supposed to do...*

Alma Yeah. And it explodes it to big emotions. You know, I definitely see it a lot with my girls because the oldest one, even though she's only 14 months older, she's always kind of like been very motherly towards the younger one. And so she since she was younger, she was always like telling her what to do. And you know, of course that worked out for a while, but we know when the older one, the little sister started, you know, resisting and no, you know, you can't tell me what to do or I'm not going to do that. Then you know, that conflict began. It's always till my, my 12-year-old, you know, hey, you know, I know that it's always been important to you, you know, to, to kinda, um, be that person in your, in your sister's life. But now that you know, she's getting older, you know, she wants to think for herself and do things for herself and it's okay for us to allow her, you know. But that's not fair. You're not, you know, when, when I do that, you, you know, you come and tell me something and that kind of, you know, again, they're dragging us into that referee role.

You know, and us, remind, you know, remembering that they're unique, they're different in the way that I handle both of them is different. Right, right. They respond to different things. And so, you know, again, you know, let me deal with that.

Maureen *Yeah, that's good. And even, even yesterday, I had this come up where I gave a blanket consequence or, um, I threatened a blanket consequence to all three of my kids. They were supposed to be going to bed and they were all, they share a room and they were all talking... actually only two of them were talking and the third was trying to sleep and I went in there a couple of times and told them to be quiet. And the last time I went in, I said, if I have to come back in and tell you guys be quiet again, then tomorrow you're all going to lose out on whatever. And the one who was quiet was like, yeah, why are we all gonna lose it? I'm sitting here being quiet and I had to say, you're right. You're totally right. I shouldn't, that doesn't make any sense. Why would I give all three of you a consequence for something two of you are doing, but, um, you know, it's easy to do that with the kids, like both of you stop fighting or when really one is causing a problem, the other is a victim or, you know, there's so many layers...*

Alma Treating them as individuals. You know, a lot of times, you know, we, we uh, ignite some of that energy by saying if I have to come back here, or I'm hearing you, or I'm listening... you know. And so we're like, instead of calming, you know, we're, we're igniting it. And so kind of like maybe, you know, hey, it looks like, you know, you guys need mommy to, you know, to sit here for a minute until you guys are able to, to quiet down or to calm down and, you know, stay in her bed and just, you know, doing, you know, those little five minutes sometimes is all it takes, you know, for them to be able to unwind, you know?

Maureen *And so, that's such a good point that there are often things we do that ignite conflict. Um, and I'm curious, what are some other things that you've seen or that you talk to parents about that are things that parents do that, that accidentally sometimes set up sibling conflict?*

Alma Yeah. So I think two things, one of them is the birth order, you know? And so a lot of times as parents, we lock them into this, you know, like you're the older brother, he's, you know, he's younger than you, you know better. You know, he's, you know, he's still a baby or, you know, we kind of get in the, into that conflict.

And, and again, you know, we get pulled in, in, you know, uh, creating some of those things ourselves without being aware of it. And so, you know, not mentioning, you know, not giving them specific roles of, you know, because you're the big brother you have to, um, you know, be able to watch or you're, you know, they're, you're their role model, you know, that puts a lot of pressure on, you know, you're, they're watching you, they're learning from you. And again, it's like all this pressure it's kind of like, think about as an adult when you're at work and, you know, you're training someone. As a stressful point, you know, because you're, you're, they're learning everything from you. And so you're thinking, you know, of course you're processing that as an adult, but imagine a kid, you know, feeling that they're in that role. And again, you know, that creates conflict because then that animosity starts to happen, you know? Well, I'm resentful of my younger sibling, because, you know, it's like, we all, you know, we always have to watch him or we always have to, you know, he's the youngest one and that kind of thing, or, you know, the middle child.

A lot of times we talk about that middle child syndrome and you know, that like what, what, what is my role? You know, I'm not the oldest, the youngest, you know, like, you know, I'm, I'm sort of like here in the middle, you know.

Maureen *I'm a middle child so I can relate.*

Alma Yeah. And, you know, so, you know, again, you know, and not all, you know, birth order, doesn't, doesn't necessarily, again, you know, they're... all kids are different. And so it doesn't necessarily mean that the oldest sibling, you know, it's always going to be the leader or always going to be in charge or, you know, just kind of like working with them through developing those abilities and those skills without assigning them in that role.

And the other role that we assign them to is gender roles. And so, you know, we might break up things in the house as chores, you know, like saying, uh, Bobby, go do the yard

and you know, and Mary you're in charge of doing dishes or sweeping, you know, and kind of like those old gender roles, you know, we, we still, you know, even though, you know, things have definitely changed, for everyone, you know, uh, we still tend to, uh, you know, assign them at home. And so being careful and mindful of that, you know, am I only allowing her to do, you know, house chores and allowing him to do yard work, you know, and making sure that, you know, both of them share, you know, different, different chores. And so she's also, you know, in charge of taking out the trash or raking leaves or, you know, things that we tend to, to, uh, only allow boys to do.

Maureen *I can see that not just with chores, but also with the standards that we hold for boys and girls. So like, um, I, I am sure I'm guilty of it. Um, but when a girl is being mildly, you know, wild saying... having less leeway than with a boy, like a boy's allowed to do this, and then a girl isn't, cause she's not being a lady or she, you know, like in not that we're so old fashioned that we think that way, but that we accidentally sort of, we're not even conscious that sometimes we're holding girls and boys at different standards about behavior.*

Alma Definitely and, you know, again, sometimes we learn these things from our parents as well. And so the things that they told us sometimes come out of our mouth when we're parenting, you know? And so one of the things that, like, I remember my mom saying to me was like, that's not lady like, you know, lady like was always... and that really bothered me because, you know, I was rough and loud and like, you know, I was a lot rougher than my brother was and so, you know, it was like, when she said things like that, it was like, well, what, you know. Yeah. Um, and so, but you know, yet again, you find yourself saying things like that, like this is how a lady sits or, you know, things like that without that awareness. Um, and, and that's something, you know, that we, when we have that self-awareness, we can start changing some of those words and those things that we are locking our kids into, like, you know, it, you know, instead of mentioning the role, or, like, you know, saying, you know, like boys are supposed to be tough or girls, or you're not, you know, and not locking them into those, those type of things, because that's just not the reality, you know, in life.

Maureen *And when you talked about birth order, I had the same thought about our expectations. I am positive that I hold my oldest child to higher expectations than I hold my younger kids to. And definitely my youngest, I feel like gets away with so much because I think of her as younger, like she's three and I think of her like a baby. And when my oldest was three, I thought of him like a big kid. And so, you know, it's just that perspective of she's the youngest, she's the baby. And, and I say it out loud. I say, well, she's just a baby. Just let her do it. I think if my three-year, if my oldest had done that at three, there's no way I would've let that slide because I thought he was a big kid and he had, you know, um, so it definitely just requires us to really... that awareness you're talking about really have to think about all those things*

Alma Yeah. And you know, one of my groups is mindful parenting and we, you know, use, you know, examples like that of ways that we can, you know, we catch ourselves saying things like that and just, yeah, having that moment of, you know, awareness, you know, I think helps us a lot. And so with, um, with that, you know, we, we tend to have favoritism sometimes or like, you know, soft heart for the baby or like, oh, this is my last

baby. Or, you know, or you're my oldest son, you know, I want you to be tough and strong and, you know, or we ourselves put them into those roles. And, and, you know, sometimes they are unpleasant and they're higher expectations and like really, am I being realistic with what my expectations are here? Or, you know, how would that feel from my standpoint, you know, do I like to be compared or do I like to be treated that way? You know, and you know, the answer is going to be no, then, you know, how can I foster different, you know, different feelings and emotions here with, with our kids.

And like, for me, I was the oldest of five siblings. And so I was always the, had to be like responsible for all of them. And there was no, no choice. And it's kind of you're in charge, you know, your, you know, make sure they do their homework, make sure, make sure they eat, make sure, you know, all this responsibility on, on a young kid, you know, can be really difficult. And, um, to this day I noticed like the middle sisters and the younger sisters and how we, um, there's four sisters and how we all, you know, uh, act, you know, amongst ourselves. Like my little sister will come in and sit down and just, you know, expect, you know, someone to, you know, bring her a plate or, you know, hey, you know, bring me, can you give me a drink or things like that. And now I'm still finding myself as an older sister catering. So like, you know, just have a seat, I'll get you, you know, I'll get you a plate or I'll take care of that. Or let me, you know, let me pick this up. And I'm still being like motherly towards them and I'm still holding myself, like finding myself feeling responsible for, you know, things that happen with them.

Maureen *That's such a good point that these things are not inconsequential, that all those little messages that we send our kids about how they fit into the family dynamic, they carry that with them. And the, and there's certainly a lot of research around birth order and what happens to oldest siblings in the workplace and youngest siblings and middle children. And there's of course exceptions, but there are lots of trends with those and we see them. So it's so... that the sibling relationships that we build in our homes do have long-term consequences, for sure.*

Okay. So we are wrapping up here, but I'm wondering if you would give us your closing sort of final advice. What advice do you have just in general to help kids form those strong relationships with their siblings?

Alma Yeah. So again, one thing that I think about is like, what were the things that, you know, the fond memories that I hold, you know, about my siblings and some of the special things that we did, because we're all either three or five years apart. And so regardless of how many years apart, you know, your kids are finding ways that they can bond and interact. And there's so many ways, you know, that they can do that through, you know, maybe like a board game, you know, like we can all play this board game or where we know we can, uh, have a movie night and, you know, letting different, you know, uh, kids select a movie or, um, playing outdoors, you know, uh, camping trips, you know, things like that, you know, really foster, you know, that, those memories and that we're creating with them.

And so, um, just, you know, being creative and thinking about, you know, as a family, what do we enjoy doing and what are some of the things that we can maybe experience

that, those experiences that are going to really um, develop, you know, these memories and form, you know, lifelong, you know, relationships between the siblings.

And, uh, one thing that I heard recently that was, you know, really stayed with me was that there's one word, you know, that to kind of remind us of how special the sibling, uh, role is and that's forever. And so, you know, that, you know, she's forever going to be your sister, he's forever going to be your brother, you know? And so that word, you know, really makes you feel, you know, like this is so special, this is such a special relationship and it's a relationship unlike any other. And so how, you know, how do we create those memories, those good things, you know, that that happen. And even if it's small activities, you know, like let's, you know, go for a walk or let's do this, you know, there's so many ways that we can still interact with our kids and different, you know, as a, as a family.

Maureen *I love that. And I think about, um, when my kids get along the best or when we have the best sort of special family time is when it's just us. And we're, especially if we go on vacation or we go on a road trip, but even if we're just spend the day, uh, you know, we go out, we spend time outside or we just stay home and play a board game. That's when I notice that my kids really get along really well. And sometimes, you know, we're quick to like always invite friends over or have, you know, like, uh, spend time with larger groups, but when we really buckle down and it's just our, just our immediate family, then the kids really form those really strong relationships. And I noticed that's when they really get along best actually.*

Alma Yeah. With my kids, you know, of course my son is 18 years older than the girls, but he, you know, even though he's 30 and they're 11 and 12, like you might think, well, what kind of things, you know, might they do that, you know, that are appropriate in that, you know, in their sibling, um, relationship. And one thing that they've been doing lately that I think is really neat is that my oldest son has been creating movies with them. And so he writes them and they, you know, they, he writes like the whole play of what they're going to do and how they're going to do them. And so, they'll do it all on the iPad and, you know, he'll film, you know, like you're doing this, you know, and so that's one thing that the girls love when he comes over. They're like, hey, can we film a movie? Have you written a new script for us to play? But then they enjoy that and they do it outside and inside and it just kind of get really creative. And, and so that's a special memory that they have of their brother and something that they've done together. And we have videos too, that we, you know, they laugh at and watch and think about and so, yeah. There's always some, you know, some kind of creative ways that they can make that happen. And I think that's important for us to foster and allow.

Maureen *That's so sweet. Well, this has been a great conversation. I really appreciate it, given me a lot to think about and some new things to try. So thank you so much for talking with us today.*

Alma Thank you, Maureen, for allowing me this opportunity.

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