

Anna: Sibling Strife. This is Stay Happily Married Episode Number 261.

Announcer: Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Anna: I'm Anna Riley, and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. Does long standing sibling rivalry really have an impact on a marriage? So where does sibling rivalry start in the first place? According to academic professionals at the University of Michigan Health System, the most fundamental effect and characteristic of sibling rivalry is jealousy.

Constant arguments between siblings creates a strong feeling of tension in the household that's felt by everyone. It's also been suggested that rivalry between siblings has negative effects on the marriage of the parents, as the problems experienced between the siblings begin to make the parents more likely to disagree about who is right and who is wrong in different situations.

So, what is the best way to ease the tensions and quell the rivalries? Our guest today is Dr. Kristen Wynns, a child psychologist and parenting testing and custody specialist and the owner of Wynns Family Psychology. With extensive experience in child and parenting issues, Kristen has seen her fair share of family tension derived from sibling rivalry.

According to her, spouses can reduce the negative effects of the rivalry by communicating with each other and presenting a unified front to the children. Welcome to show, Kristen. I'm so glad you could join us.

Kristen: Thank you. Glad to be here.

Anna: Now before we start into some of our questions, I'm under the impression that you guys are having a sibling strife workshop coming up?

Kristen: We are. We're very excited about this. It's the first time we've offered this, but partly because we've seen that this is such a common problem for families, and we've seen how it's really stressful for kids and for parents to have the kids fighting with each other. We thought it would be a really neat idea to offer a workshop for both sides of the problem.

So we're going to have one psychologist working with the sibling pairs in one room doing a variety of fun exercises and activities, and then I'll be working with the parents in another room to give them strategies and tips for how to help with sibling rivalries. So it should be a really good experience for everybody.

Anna: Yeah. Definitely. That sounds good. So what day is that?

Kristen: We're having it September 23rd in the evening from 5:30 to 7:00. And we have the flyer with all the details on our website.

Anna: Mm-hmm. And we'll be sure to put the link for that flyer on the Stay Happily Married site as well, so all of our listeners can access that if they choose.

Kristen: Great.

Anna: So, alright, well let's talk about these rivalries, you know the sibling rivalries. Where-, you know, do you see them forming in any particular type of family or do you see certain factors or triggers that cause them more?

Kristen: Well, it's certainly common for most siblings to fight at one point or another, but certainly we know that siblings who are close in age and the same gender are more at risk for having conflict. So kids that are two girls who are close in age, or two boys who are close in age, they're more likely to have conflict and of course, if there's general discord in the family, such as high marital conflict, that's also going to increase the likelihood that the kids are also experiences more conflict with each other.

Anna: Right. Okay. Well, so when siblings are maybe jealous of each other, does it ever come from how they are treated by the parents?

Kristen: Well, sibling jealousy is one of the most common reasons kids fight with each other, and a lot of times it's siblings perceiving that the other child is getting more attention or love or material things or privileges from the parents.

Oftentimes it's the children's perception, and it's not necessarily reality. But there's a natural competition between siblings where they're just going to be naturally thinking that their parent's attention or love is a limited resource and that they need to do all they can to get the most of it.

Anna: Right. So what do you see some parents doing to minimize the jealousy between their kids?

Kristen: Well, oftentimes parents from no fault of their own, they assume that if they do all they can to try to treat the kids equally that that will help. So sometimes this can really be exhausting for parents. I know my poor mom keeps a Christmas list for all of us, and she tries to get it down to the dollar and to the cent so that she's spending the same on all of us.

So that kind of thing, of course, if you want to try to be even with your Christmas gifts, that's fine, but sometimes that same mentality parents take every day, so they're trying to make sure that they, if they get one child a toy or spend money on them, that they're going to have to get the other sibling something. Or if they plan a special outing for one child that they need to do it for the other one.

And that kind of mentality can actually be quite stressful for parents and also really unhelpful to kids. So I always tell parents it's natural in life for things to not always be fair. And it's also natural in life if you've done a really good job for you to be rewarded above someone else.

So I encourage parents to try to focus more on the broad strokes of being balanced between siblings and not try to have a balanced or equal day, so to speak but to really look at long-term. Are they generally treating the siblings the same? Are they making sure that things balance out

on a week by week or even month by month basis and don't get too caught up in the moment with trying to make things too even for kids?

Anna: Right. Right. Have you seen, maybe with some of the people that you've seen or do you see in some families, what's the problem with parents always trying to make everything so even between children?

Kristen: Right. First of all, again, it can be a little mentally exhausting for the poor parents in trying to keep track of everything. But also sometimes that does communicate the wrong message to kids. Let's say, for example, a child has had an amazing day and been very helpful around the house and very sweet, it would be perfectly natural for parents to say, "Hey, you've done an awesome job today. Why don't you stay up 30 minutes late tonight and have some bonus TV time?"

So if there's the other sibling there who's been a holy terror all day and whose wreaked havoc and not been nice and not been helpful, that's a very helpful life lesson for that sibling to see, "Hey, when you do good things, you're rewarded." So with that, inequality is actually teaching a valuable lesson.

Anna: Right. Mm-hmm. I see. So do you ever see parents bringing their own sibling baggage, in a sense, into how they feel about the rivalry between their kids?

Kristen: This is common, and it can also cause marital tension between the parents. So depending on each parent's own birth order and their relationships with their own siblings, sometimes they might both be looking at the same fight between their kids and see it completely differently, which can sometimes cause conflict if each of them is kind of siding with the other child . . .

Anna: Right.

Kristen: . . . that might cause the parents to fight. One example might be, let's say we've got a first born married to someone who was the baby in the family. So the first born might be looking at the conflict and seeing how the little one is getting away with it, and how the little one is doing things in a sneaky way just because they're the small, adorable one.

And maybe the spouse is the baby of the family, and they're seeing how the older sibling is bullying the little one and is teasing them. So they both might come into that with their own sensitivities, based on their own birth order and their relationships that they went through with their siblings. Again, perception is everything, so they might have a different perspective on what's going on and how to handle it.

Anna: Right. Well, what kind of tips do you give to parents about these kinds of issues? And how to not let them have such a negative impact on their own marriage?

Kristen: Probably, the number one rule of thumb is for parents to present that united front. So this is good advice, really when we're talking about anything relating to the kids, but especially if

it's something with kids fighting with each other and the sibling rivalry. Even if parents are seeing it differently, and even if they might be disagreeing about the best way to handle the sibling fight, at least, in front of the kids if they could present that united front, meaning that they don't argue with the other one, or question the other one's judgment in front of the kid.

That's the kind of situation where I would just advise parents to say to the kids, "Hey, we need to have a few minutes to talk about how to handle this, so give us a few minutes and we'll come back." And that way, they can sort of discuss their disagreements and then come back and come up with a consequence that they both agree on, so the kids see the parents as a really unified team. So that's one of the biggest thing parents can do.

Also, of course, parents can have a very valuable role in modeling good conflict resolution strategies for the kids. So to make suggestions about how to handle a disagreement, and if parents have a minor disagreement, it's healthy to model for the kids how to compromise, or how to take turns, and say "Alright, well, you get to pick this time, I'll pick next time" so parents have a great role with just being role models for how to deal with conflict.

Some other ideas I suggest to parents, oftentimes parents ask me when they should intervene and when they should ignore it. And a lot of parents have the natural tendency, they want to jump right in and break up the fight when their kids are fighting. But I recommend to the parents that they ignore the small squabbles and really only address the big ones.

If parents are always jumping in and breaking up the fight, kids will never learn those valuable conflict resolution skills, so I sort of jokingly say if you don't see blood or hear someone screaming, then you can probably just let them work it out on their own. And even though I say that somewhat jokingly, that's really the best advice. If it sounds like just bickering, then it's probably good just to leave it alone. But if you really hear someone is upset and screaming or hurt, then of course, a parent needs to jump in and intervene and come up with a solution.

Anna: Right. Right. I guess in a sense it gives the kids a good way or a good sense of how to manage conflict that they'll have all throughout their lives really with other people as they get older, and . . .

Kristen: Exactly. And another one I really like that I use with my own kids all the time is if you can get the siblings to sort of unite and feel like they're a team against the parents, that helps a lot. So, for example, last week we were getting ready to go to the pool and my girls were in the backseat fighting with each other, so I said, "Okay, I'm going to go and get the rest of my stuff. When I come back, if you guys are still fighting, we're going to unload the car, we're not going to the pool, and we're going to come inside and do chores. So I'll be back and I would suggest that you guys have this resolved by then."

When I left, I could kind of hear them quickly start to talk to each other like. "Okay, well you do this and let's do this," and they worked out the problem. By the time I got back they had come up with something so they were quiet in the car . . .

Anna: Mm-hmm.

Kristen: . . . and we could still go to the pool, but basically at that point, they were united, the two of them against me.

Anna: Right. Right.

Kristen: They decided they wanted to work together to go to the pool, so I really like that as a sort of a sneaky strategy . . .

Anna: Definitely.

Kristen: . . . when kids are fighting to get them to sort of team up with each other against the parents . . .

Anna: Right. Right.

Kristen: . . . so to speak.

Anna: Definitely. Well, Kristen, is there anything else that we should know?

Kristen: Well, just one more thing I think is really helpful for parents to do. I do like for parents to share their own stories with their kids about when they were a kid and how they got along with their siblings because as we know, again, almost all kids are going to fight with each other. But I think it's helpful for parents to tell their stories and say, "Hey, when I was your age, my brother or my sister and I would fight all the time, and we would get so mad at each other, but look at us now."

I do that with my kids. I'll talk about how my sisters are my best friends now, and I think that's helpful to point kids to looking at the big picture that friends come and go but your siblings, most of the time, much of the time, end up being your best friends when you're adults . . .

Anna: Right.

Kristen: . . . really keep sowing those seeds, even at a young age, for them to look forward to that and to sort of have that as their goal.

Anna: Mm-hmm. Right. Well, that's a good point for sure. Well, Kristen, thank you so much for talking with me and being on the show today.

Kristen: Sure thing. I enjoyed it.

Anna: To find out more about Kristen and her practice, Wynns Family Psychology, you can visit their website at [www.wynnsfamilypsychology.com](http://www.wynnsfamilypsychology.com). And that's W-Y-N-N-S Family Psychology.com or you can call 919-467-7777 for an appointment. And make sure you check out their website for that workshop that we were talking about earlier, the sibling strife workshop.

They're going to be having that on September 23rd from 5:30 to 7:00 p.m. You can also find a link to the flyer on our website as well.

Thank you so much for joining us today, and I hope you'll join us again next week. For more information about this show and future episodes, visit us at [StayHappilyMarried.com](http://StayHappilyMarried.com). I'm Anna Riley. Until next time, stay happily married.

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