

## Week 3: Welcome to Your House of Cards



Welcome back to Parenting 2.0. We've now gone over the guilt factor and sibling relationships and are moving towards something that really encompasses both of these themes, but take it a little further - the house of cards. You see, parenting two kids seems to make your house - and your life - suddenly morph from a sturdy structure in which you feel that things are generally under control to something that could fall over at the slightest gust of wind. Really this falling apart is another term for "chaos". Yes, our homes become utter chaos in so many ways. While many will know about the practical issues surrounding the chaos, like constant mess and no time to do the basics of cleaning, there is also the emotional chaos that surrounds us in this new setup. Although we discussed sibling relationships and jealousy last week, this week we'll also take that a step further to discuss what happens when things really fall apart because that is often one of the biggest triggers for the chaos.

I have to be honest here that sometimes the best I can offer you is a way to accept some of the chaos. Unfortunately you won't have full control over your house or your life for a very long time. This is the nature of living with other people who have their own minds and ideas about things. But sometimes we can identify ways to help us keep the house from completely collapsing. It's a lot easier to fix things that are only partially damaged than to try and rebuild from scratch.

This week is broken up into three sections that deal with a variety of different issues. We will talk about sleep as this is an area of great concern for many families, when siblings attack each other physically and our reactions to these moments (which are often less-than-serene), and the issue of housekeeping (or lack thereof). For our bonus section, I talk about one power that we can harness to help in almost all of these areas - nature.

Let's get started...

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### Section 1: To Sleep or Not to Sleep?



Sleep was already hard enough for most people the first time around, so the idea of not only going through that again, but adding the potential issue of an elder child not sleeping well or needing more help than you can give is definitely daunting. As I mentioned in week 1, often this is one of the areas where things feel like they need to change ahead of time, but they often don't. However, depending on our expectations for what sleep is going to look like with two kids, we can set ourselves up for a huge amount of stress surrounding sleep. There are four main issues with sleep that cause things to feel like they're falling apart:

1. Napping schedules for baby because of activities for the eldest or how to keep eldest occupied during contact naps
2. Bedtime struggles of getting two down, especially if they go down around the same time
3. Losing even more sleep as you can't catch up during the day as you may have with just one child
4. Fears of kids waking each other at night if in the same room

#### Section 1a: Napping

Let's start with napping. Now, many of you may have had a nice napping schedule with your first that worked really well and you start to look at your youngest and wonder how the heck you're going to get this lovely little creature to sleep during the day when there are tons of things going on with your other child. Your youngest may *want* to nap at noon, but you're out picking up your eldest from preschool, so what then?

Given our society's obsession with sleep, it's no wonder families worry about this because we often fear that if our babies don't get these high-quality, long-lasting naps, they will be irreparably harmed. Let me say now that *this is not true*. There is no research suggesting long-term damage from short naps or irregular napping and in fact some suggest that shorter naps can be linked to earlier consolidation of nighttime sleep (though I'm sure many of you will scoff at this as parents of regular wakers who still take

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irregular and short naps). Your baby will be fine even if there is no real sleep schedule that you follow. In fact, for most of human history babies have just been allowed to fall asleep on the go and wake up when they are ready with no real concern by parents or others. And this is exactly what you will need to adapt to as the parent of two.

Yes, I am saying that you will need to kill expectations of controlling sleep for your youngest and just let go and let your baby sleep when they are tired. Chances are you'll get really good at having them napping on the go, with your baby either sleeping in a carrier on you or in the stroller or in a car seat. And when you get where you're going, maybe that's the end of the nap or maybe your baby learns to sleep through some of the chaos in order to get the sleep they need. It's funny but I have often found that when families had a hard time with sleep with their first child and they had to let go with their second, they found it much *easier* likely in part due to the fact that they no longer were trying to control it. Remember that sleep is part of a rhythm and homeostatic process that was designed to develop well as long as we don't go around messing with it too much (something we sadly do in our society). There is something to be said about letting go and letting our babies find their rhythm as we go about our days.

The second issue with napping is if you have a contact napper (i.e., a baby who has to nap on you - very normal indeed) and an older child who wants your attention during this naptime. This is hard when you feel you should be giving your eldest quality time during naps and so people try to force independent sleep before their baby is ready. This often leads to stress and anxiety for everyone and no one is happy. Instead of trying to force your youngest to comply, there are some other alternatives:

1. Pick games that you can do while holding a baby, like setting up (ahead of time of course) a scavenger hunt for your eldest that they can do and bring back to you as you hold your baby. You'll have the playtime and engagement, but it's done in a way you can stay sitting or laying down with baby. You can also consider things like reading books, listening to an audiobook, colouring, and so on.
2. Let your eldest use the screen. Some families who are okay with screen time find this is the perfect time for it as it allows you to rest a bit with your baby while your eldest is likely happily occupied. This won't be for everyone as some kids don't do well with screens, but if it's an option for you, it's one worth considering.
3. Use a carrier for your baby so you can go out and go places with your eldest, even if it's just a walk around the block or a trip to the park. These outings can feel like quality time for our kids even though their sibling is there too and it can be good for us to get out and move instead of feeling like the house is coming down around us.

Regardless, don't plan on naptime being any kind of special time with your eldest because you don't have control over when, how long, or where your baby will sleep. If you happen to luck out and have a baby that likes to go down alone for naps, then you can start planning things, but if not, don't worry, just don't set yourself up for failure by thinking you can make things happen that are beyond your control.

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### Section 1b: Bedtime Struggles

If you've already got two kids you may already know the intricate puzzle that is getting two kids down to bed. Even if you have a partner who is able to do bedtime for one of them, there's the issue of how they seem to find a way to work each other up before bed, leading to a more difficult time getting them in the bedroom. And if both kids want the same person to put them to sleep? Well, that puzzle just got a whole lot harder.

There are so many variants based on where kids sleep and how they fall asleep, but I want to start by reassuring you that your children will want you for sleep for some time and that is, again, 100% normal. You may have been lied to and told that toddlers or preschoolers shouldn't need parents to hold their hand or lay down with them for sleep. That's not true. Some kids might do fine without it, but certainly many kids need that bit of support to feel safe at night and sleep as peacefully as they can. Please remember that.

In terms of bedtimes themselves, let's focus on the worst-case scenario of two kids (any ages) who both need the same parent, have a similar bedtime, and may lose their minds if they are not in direct contact with the parent at all times during bedtime. No, you aren't alone in this scenario - I promise. The first thing you need to remember is that whatever your sleep situation is now, having them in the same room or even bed (depending on safety) is probably going to be a life-saver here. When this happens, you can get into bed with both of them at the same time and that can mean the difference between chaos and actually getting them to sleep.

If one needs a bit of extra time with you first, then you want to try and get part of a routine going with the other parent prior to the other child joining you in bed. Sometimes when our kids know they will be with one parent coming up, it's easier to wait that little bit and tolerate part of the routine done by someone else.

The second thing to remember is that you will need to have a good grasp on how tired they are. You will be walking the fine line of needing them tired enough, but not too tired such that they may lose their mind or get easily worked up by their sibling. In my sleep course we cover this in depth and I have other articles on topics like this on EP. I recommend looking some of that up if you can to make sure you're getting the right bedtime for your kids.

The third thing to remember is that if there is an external stimuli that is peaceful for them, chances are they won't go at each other (a common problem when putting two to sleep together). I have used guided meditations, ocean waves, nature music, and so on as a means to provide a calming environment (in the dark) and to keep kids from engaging too much with each other so they fall asleep.

If you've been having a hard time with two, it may take some time to make these adjustments as our kids can expect the negative. If you are switching routines to one more like this (or anything else), consider a visual schedule for your eldest so that they can see what is changing, hopefully for the better for them.

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If you aren't in this worst-case scenario, there are still a few things to remember:

1. Kids can rile each other up in the evening and so your job is to make sure that whatever engagement they have isn't so much that it disrupts sleep. Hyper play is normal, but you want to make sure it's not getting into that frenetic energy stage. If it is, I recommend games like hide-and-seek or freeze dance which involve movement, but also the down time as they freeze or hide which allows sleep to take over.
2. If your eldest is upset that they are going to bed first, it's okay to just empathize and explain that their sleep needs are different and their sibling will likely go to bed earlier as they get older too. If you can, have baby with another person so that you can make that bedtime a special time to make up for the earlier bedtime.
3. If your baby falls asleep first and can't be transferred to someone else and your eldest wants you alone, you will have to find time in the evening for that one-on-one time before bed and make it clear that this is the alone time and baby may be with you in bed as you snuggle to sleep. Or ask your eldest to help problem-solve this with you using the parameters that baby will be there at bedtime (again, though, sharing a room makes this much easier to cope with because the eldest will know that baby is sleeping in this room too).
4. If you are doing bedtimes solo and they have different bedtimes and need to be with you, it's also okay to have whoever is awake in the room with you with a red light to look at books or anything like that. Having it be a safe space where quiet play can happen as one child falls asleep can make it easier for everyone. Just expect that bedtime will probably take a bit longer.

Overall, remember that bedtime struggles can often be minimized (though likely never eliminated) through changing set-ups and expectations. And I am happy to talk to any of you during office hours to help navigate this difficult area.

### Section 1c: Losing Sleep

Most of you are acutely aware of the sleep deprivation that comes with a new baby. Hopefully this second time around you've got more ideas of how to cope with it. One thing that many parents do that gets harder the second time around is to sleep when baby sleeps. This includes naps or sleeping in, but when there's another child to care for, this becomes nearly impossible.

Obviously there is the first issue of getting as much help as possible because this means you may be able to take that nap or catch up on sleep whenever possible. I urge families to look at weekly times when someone can help with two kids (whether it's another parent, a grandparent, a friend, or even hired help) so you can just sleep. Even once a week can make a big difference to a really sleep-deprived individual. However, not everyone is able to do this for a variety of reasons, whether it's work or accessible help, or something else. Yet we still all need some help in the sleep department. The following is the list of things you can do and things I suggest not doing during these times.

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Do	Don't Do
<p>Use guided relaxation or guided meditation techniques throughout the day as needed. These can have a profound effect on your mental well-being.</p> <p>Consider cat napping as even 15-20 minutes of a nap (which we can almost always fit in) is a benefit.</p> <p>Rest when you can. You may not be able to sleep, but if you can rest more frequently instead of feeling like you should take any down time with babies to do more, your health and mental well-being will benefit from it.</p> <p>Go for a walk. Many times the antidote to exhaustion is a bit of gentle exercise and being outside is a wonderful way to feel better.</p>	<p>Sleep train your child. This is not the answer to a problem that really stems from a lack of societal support.</p> <p>Over-caffeinate. Too much caffeine will cause more problems at nighttime so no matter how much you may want that 4pm coffee, consider a decaf and hope for a placebo effect (it is a real effect after all).</p> <p>Drink alcohol. I'm all for a good glass of wine, but when you're exhausted, it's just going to have a negative effect on your sleep so try to wait until you have a bit more in the tank before enjoying that drink.</p> <p>Focus on chores. I'll get to the issue of the house shortly, but suffice it to say that focusing too much on the house at the expense of your well-being is not a good plan of action.</p>

#### Section 1d: Overnights

More than almost anything else, the fear I hear the most is about overnights. Families panic over the idea that the baby might wake the older sibling or even vice versa. This is the reason so many families decide they want to make changes *before* baby is born to get their eldest sleeping in their own room, away from any potential disruptions. We have already discussed briefly how you may not want to make that change back in Week 1, but let's go into it in a bit more depth here. In my perspective, this often isn't just not warranted, but you may be missing out on a great way to build those sibling bonds we spoke about last week.

First let's talk about how deeply our eldest kids sleep. It's deep. When they do go down (regardless of their wake-ups), they are often in a coma-like sleep unless there's an underlying problem that disrupts their sleep (in which case I suggest seeking help from a non-sleep trainer). Although we worry about white noise and trying to make things quiet for our kids to sleep, they will actually usually sleep through A LOT when they are tired. If we think about how we evolved as a species, children were not sleeping alone, away from caregivers, and caregivers weren't being all quiet, but going about their day. This isn't to say there aren't artificial noises in our modern environment that aren't problematic, but people talking, babies crying or cooing, and daily living aren't those noises. You may have noticed your child wakes suddenly at a car honking, but not at music playing; we haven't really evolved with the more artificial noises and thus they are more likely to disrupt us.

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This means that the chances of a baby waking our eldest kids is smaller than we think and so our fears of our eldest never sleeping are likely overblown. But the chances are not zero and it's likely that at least once your eldest will be woken by your baby. What then? I like to think of this as a great moment to build empathy, understanding, and a bond in the middle of the night.

When our eldest gets to see how a baby wakes and needs help, it allows us the opportunity to talk about the times we had with them in the middle of the night when they were babies. We get to talk about the needs of small babies and their helplessness, which helps our eldest feel empathy for the plight of the young infant. There is also something about the still of the night and being with two awake kids who are getting to know each other. It is peaceful and can create strong bonds as the world outside is silent and it's just the three (or four) of you there doing your thing at night. With all families that I know who have not separated their kids, they have found these moments beneficial to the relationship between their kids, even if they didn't feel the sense of peace that I admit I had in those moments. But I can say that you don't need to worry about your eldest being upset at being woken by baby and somehow resenting baby for it. Instead, take this moment to relish the time with them both and try to enlist the help of your eldest (if they are up for it) to calm and settle an upset baby (if needed).

I will note that maybe you have a particularly bad night with both kids and the worry is that your eldest has activities, school, daycare, whatever and you don't want them missing out. *It's okay to miss out on a day or two.* The most crucial thing here is bonding and your eldest's sense of safety and love. If your eldest isn't ready to move to their own space, you are not helping them by forcing it. If the only reason for that is to avoid these wakings, then remember that these times can be beneficial to the sibling relationship. Missing a day of anything is worth that.

Now what about the eldest waking your baby? This may be more likely if you have a regular waker, but even this isn't necessarily likely or to be considered a huge issue to be resolved. This goes back to what I said earlier in that we tend to fear all noise for babies, but really they evolved to learn to sleep in these situations. Even when noises are initially a bit of an issue as our babies adapt to the world outside, they eventually learn what noises are normal and what ones aren't and can use that to know when they need to rouse. A waking sibling will become a normal sound not to cause distress and waking. This is why it's so important to make sure our kids *are* exposed to such noises.

*Note: If you have a child with sensory issues, then this may be different, but we will talk about this next week when we look at how to handle two when one child has special needs or is higher-needs.*

Finally, if your kids are older, sometimes there is fear of kids sharing a room once they are out of the family room (if they are there). Kids sharing sleep space is utterly and completely normal - second only to sharing family sleep space. Yes, they may get into mischief in the middle of the night or end up playing games early in the morning. Is that bad? No, that's bonding. And sometimes that bonding can be even more obvious as one sibling can comfort another during any time of distress.

The following video is an adorable demonstration of such sibling assistance and love: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duZHNiAOL1U>. So if you're worried about all the possible disruptions, just remember the love and bonding that can come too.

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### Section 2: When Siblings Attack



As I mentioned last week, sometimes sibling jealousy and rivalry gets violent and this can be one of the things that brings down the whole house. In fact, more than sometimes, it's almost inevitable. I only say "almost" because somewhere out there I imagine there's a sibling pair for whom it didn't happen, but I'm willing to bet just about anything they were either 15 years apart or didn't live together. When we put two neurologically immature human beings with huge feelings and little regulation together, there are bound to be - shall we say - issues.

The biggest problem that comes from these interactions is not actually the fact that they are wailing on either other - though we'll talk about that - but actually in *your response as a parent*. For far too many parents, this kind of behaviour seems 100% unacceptable and it's that trigger that makes them see so very much red. This is when the house starts to fall apart. I'm not alone in this and will admit right now that the *biggest* trigger I have for my kids' behaviour is when they are going at each other. Remaining calm and empathizing feels like something only the Dalai Lama could achieve. The problem is that once we lose our cool, the whole house seems to fall into shambles. It takes much more time to get over things, kids and adults alike end up stewing and simmering with frustration for hours after, and then the guilt comes roaring back and we spend our nights going over in our heads what's wrong with us and why can't we just do better.

So naturally we have to talk about this and find out why we do it and how to get over it. But before we go there, let's explore the good, the bad, and the ugly of why our kids hit each other in hopes that we might be able to deal with some of the situations without seeing red...

#### Section 2a: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Sibling Violence

The good: Our children don't mean to, but they are either playing too rough or simply too big and don't realize their own strength. This is "good" because although someone might get hurt, there's no ill-intent and often we can keep our cool better in these situations (remember I said often, not always). In these situations, the crucial part is to learn what the limits have to be and then help set the stage for success.



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For example, if you have a newborn and your toddler wants to engage but is far too rough, instead of saying “gentle”, you have to start with how your toddler can engage in a fun and safe way and then build up. So instead of just any gentle touch, focus on blowing wind on babies feet which often makes them laugh and letting the toddler see they can engage in a positive way while also staying safe. As in almost everything you do with young kids, the more explicit you are about what they *can do*, the easier things are.

Another example is roughhousing when you have a preschooler or older and a toddler. You can't get them to just stop because often they love it, but you can tell them that they can only do it on a soft surface (like putting pillows down on the ground), away from walls and sharp edges, they cannot touch anyone's face or groin, and they have to take breaks every 5 minutes to breathe and just check in. Accidents will still happen and the rules may be modified based on experience, but when they know what they can do, they are more likely to be able to follow it.

If you are a parent who wants to make sure you are there for these types of engagements, then you have to make that clear. You also have to make sure they have these opportunities. Too often kids go all out because they aren't given the chance to engage in the way that they want to. Just please don't helicopter too much. When we helicopter their interactions unnecessarily, we often set higher expectations for our older kids and then they inevitably fall short. This leads to negative feelings, a lack of connection, resentment, jealousy, and possibly the one thing we're trying to prevent - violence.

The bad: This is the kind of violence that comes when our kids are *reacting* to something the other has done. Your baby grabs a toy out of your eldest's hands and the eldest takes a swap to get it back. Or the youngest grabs hair and the eldest pushes him off harshly. Or even the other way around when the eldest takes something from your youngest and your youngest wails with fists of fury. These are the most common types of violence that parents face and ones that can result in a lot of yelling and frustration.

Let's start by acknowledging that these responses are all very, very normal given the ages of our children. Even if our kids are “older” in the sense of being school-age, children in general are not known for their cool heads and calm demeanor in the face of someone seemingly attacking them. In fact, arguably none of us are(!) which is why we adults end up yelling and threatening too much. In handling these situations in the moment, there is nothing more important than separating them and providing love to each. Really. Don't grab things out of hands or try to force the return of objects, but instead focus on empathy for each of them because they each were harmed. Again - and I can't say this enough - your job isn't to fix the problem, but be there for each of them so they can work it out when they are capable. As I say to my kids, we try not to *react*, but to take a moment and then *respond* which means we can see what the other child is looking to do. But with that said - even with older kids, it's really hard.

You can also take some preventative measures by reminding them every now and again who is playing with what and how to keep their own items safe. You can suggest things to share or engage a younger sibling with if they seem to be encroaching on the eldest's stuff. You can also try to offer suggestions of games that involve both of them or ways they can use their individual skills and desires together - like

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having the eldest build towers specifically for the youngest to knock down. Just remember that these events are normal, even though they aren't fun.

The ugly: This is when parents tend to worry. This is the kind of violence where our kids seem to go after one another for no apparent reason. They may laugh afterwards or look utterly like they have no remorse whatsoever. They may seem angry, but not be able to articulate why, just lashing out at their sibling for some unknown reason. Parents tend to get really angry at these situations and I find it's when parents are most at risk of using punishment or yelling with their kids. We'll talk about why we can be so triggered by these situations in a moment, but let's first discuss what's really going on.

There are a few reasons why this type of violence comes up. The first is that the child really is reacting to something, but it's less obvious. It is likely jealousy (a very common one) that hasn't been vocalized, just stewed on until the child lets it out, and the reasons for jealousy are as varied as what was covered earlier so always look to those types of events in terms of the underlying cause so you can speak to the other child about why it might be happening, even though it doesn't make it right.

The second reason is the child is feeling shame over something else. When our kids feel bad about themselves, they will express it by either internalizing or externalizing and those who externalize are showing you exactly how they feel. Getting to the root of what might be wrong (think if you've said anything angry recently because that can be a trigger for them) and focus on solving that problem.

The third reason is that the child is in sensory overload. Not all experiences of sensory overload manifest as big outbursts, but sometimes the child tries to control it and then can't and lashes out. Importantly, you may not see the link if your child is simply in coping stage during the event that causes sensory distress and then lashes out once it's over because they are still in an uncontrolled state. For example, if your child struggles with loud noises and is around a child who is having a meltdown, they may stay silent during the meltdown but lash out afterwards. This is not because they are mean or aggressive, but it's the response to the sensory overload during that meltdown.

The fourth reason is that the child is dysregulated due to another physiological state like hunger or being tired. This is very common for young kids and if you see your child acting out, think about these other states first and try to address the cause there. I can say that for many families, hunger is by far the #1 cause of dysregulation and struggles so having food readily available is a really, really, really good idea at all times.

One thing to discuss here is the laughing. That is very triggering for many parents, but I remind you that many people laugh as a response to anxiety and knowing you've hurt someone and looking at angry parents is a very anxiety-producing experience. Most of the time, our kids are laughing not because they're cruel, but because they are trying to diffuse the situation or keep themselves calm. When we can approach them with the idea that they aren't intentionally trying to cause problems, we will get a lot further with helping them through that hard time and towards better regulation in the long-run.

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Regardless of the cause and in addition to the specific suggestions, there are three general things you can do to mitigate the chances of sibling violence. These are not immediate guarantees of ending it, but it can help with building understanding and lowering the chances of our kids lashing out at each other.

1. Focus on similarity. We spoke about this a lot last week because it is crucial to the building of bonds, but it's also relevant in curbing anger at typical sibling behaviours. Point out that whatever triggered your child to be violent is something either they or you have done in the past. This can help mitigate the anger and help them understand normal trajectories of behaviours. For example, when an older sibling is upset over a younger destroying their creation, it can help to point out they did that to other people's stuff when they were young or you did it to your older sibling (if you have one) too. That this is a normal stage that can be hard and invite them to think of ways to help avoid it the next time.
2. Turn your child into a teacher. This is relevant for older sibling violence and is linked to this idea of similarity. When your child knows they used to do the same and grew out of it, you can open up the door to asking them if they could help their sibling learn how to not do this as they clearly got beyond that stage. When kids have a purpose in changing behaviour they can often embrace this new role and acting as teacher can give them more patience than they otherwise would have.
3. Focus on love. Again, love is central. When our kids believe that they are loved by someone, they are kinder and calmer towards them. This is why the root of so many issues stems from this disconnection with us. In a similar vein, when we look at sibling relationships that are struggling, we can often help rectify this with a focus on love. This doesn't need to be specific to older or younger siblings, but rather whoever seems to be missing the connection most. To build this up, you can't just say one loves the other, but start to point out behaviours and actions that are indicative of love. Sometimes just letting your eldest know that the bugging behaviour from their little sibling is due to them looking up to them and wanting to be with them can thaw some of that coldness they may be feeling. You can take benign behaviours like bringing a book over or cleaning up some toys and explain them in terms of love and doing something kind for their sibling. The key is that you want to do this regularly so that they start to really internalize this feeling and it can help fill their well with their sibling in a way that helps avoid the crises to begin with. If you need to, set an alarm each day and at that moment think of something you could explain to your child that helps meet this need for their sibling.

### Section 2b: Parental Reactions

It's time to talk about how we react when our kids are fighting, especially when one is initiating and seeming to be causing the distress. Most parents feel horribly guilty for being too angry over what they see. They see red as soon as one child is hurting another and they often can't calm themselves down enough to have any productive solution.

This is normal.

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If you struggle with this, please now forgive yourself as I'm going to explain why this happens, despite your best efforts to calm. It's as simple as this: As a parent, you are hardwired to protect your children. Look at nature and you see the lengths many mothers go to in order to protect their young. You are no different. If some stranger came and hit your child, you'd lose your mind and we would all feel you were righteous in that reaction. The problem here is that *that reaction doesn't stop just because the aggressor is another one of your children.*

This is why many techniques such as just taking deep breaths don't work for a lot of people. The trigger and that protective nature is so strong that we need to get our brains in line with reality before we can use those techniques to calm.

How do we do this?

I recommend making a habit of verbalizing the fact that both of your children are your children. Your brain needs that reminder and just thinking it isn't strong enough. There is power in speaking things out loud and so taking a moment to say something like, "Okay, you are both my children" before moving forward can serve as that reminder that you love them both. Similarly, saying something that highlights their age and ability can be helpful, like, "You're only 4 and you're only 2 and you are not adults" helps bring things into focus.

Once you have said that out loud and you can feel the red fading is when you can then go and deal with the issue at hand. Now, sometimes it's still too much - I know because I get that way - and you may need to walk away for a bit to calm down before responding (and to keep from reacting). When you have to do this, the key is to own the move as something *for you*, not in reaction to them. So saying to them, "I'm overwhelmed right now and I'll be back in a minute" makes the walking away about you. It also models exactly what you hope they will do, and that's part of how they learn.

Finally, you can go in and empathize with them and then start to figure out what skills they need to overcome these struggles and what you can do to help them learn them *or* what you can do to alter the environment to minimize the chance of these struggles in the first place. These solutions are all more to do with discipline more generally than anything sibling-specific.

And just to repeat something from last week - remember that your job is to be there for your kids to help them with their relationship, not to fix their relationship for them.

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### Section 3: The House of Horrors



A common refrain in our house is, "It looks like a tornado hit it". I know I'm not alone in this and it's something that a lot of parents struggle with, especially those who are used to keeping order and having things clean and tidy. I have never been one that had to have things fully neat and tidy, but generally required some level of order to feel comfortable. That has gone out the window entirely and I have to admit, I always feel a sense of relief when I enter another house that is equally messy. Knowing I'm not alone in struggling to reign in the chaos is nice.

What many of us struggle with is understanding why keeping things neat and tidy is so hard. But also, why do we care so much?

Starting with why it's hard, the answer is twofold: kids and time. Kids seem to be inherently against anything neat and tidy. An open, clean, tidy space is one that is clearly being wasted! It seems to be something in how their brains work that they can see beauty in chaos and actually, even their chaos can have order to them. Most adults tend to view this as a negative for kids, but I think it speaks to their creativity and ability to think outside the box, traits we often want, but shut down early. I'm not going to say your house needs to look like a tornado hit it for your kids to be creative - we're getting to that, I promise - but that the tornado that is currently there is a reflection of this creativity.

The second reason is time and as we've covered already, time is even less when there's two. You may have had the time to keep things more organized with one child, but by the second, it's like trying to swim against a hurricane in the speed and efficiency to which two kids can make a mess or the lack of time to help clean around the first if your second is still a baby. Our lack of time and the effects on mess is like compound interest - the mess grows exponentially with the linear passage of time.

Sometimes we know all this and we want desperately to not care about the mess, to remind ourselves it's temporary and will pass, and know that we are not alone. But we can't. And we get upset with our

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kids, we feel burnt out because we can't keep cleaning, and we return to the question of what's wrong with us for not being able to just let go.

Let me start by saying there's nothing wrong with you. For many of us, chaos causes us anxiety. Yes, there is research that finds that in cluttered and messy environments, *some* of us get overwhelmed easily and it triggers our own anxiety and even depression or a sense of helplessness. There are likely both evolutionary and cultured reasons for this. Briefly, a cluttered (and especially altered) environment in evolutionary history could make it harder to keep us safe as we are always looking at what is different and having to assess if it is safe or not; predictability is crucial and order is predictable. There is also the fact that many of us grew up with this sense of order and the lack of it can be triggering as we can't fathom how the chaos we see is not a problem for our children. Regardless, it's good to acknowledge that it's not you that is wrong, but neither is your child who may prefer the mess.

This brings us to the issue of how we handle these situations because if no one is "wrong", then how do we co-exist in this world where we have no time to keep things tidy and children that will walk behind us undoing all we've done? The following are some ideas to help you in this regard. Not all will be relevant or work for everyone, but I hope that there is something for everyone here.

1. Reset expectations. This actually is for everyone because it's so important. Whatever your expectations are for your house, drop them down a notch or 10. This is not abandoning them as we discussed back in Week 1 when the focus was more on what we do with our kids, but rather *modifying them* as needs be for where you are right now. Setting temporary expectations over set time periods can help us calm down and actually come up with plans that work longer-term. Look to the image at the top of this section - your standards do have to lower a bit with each kid and for many, the biggest drop happens when we welcome our second.
2. Prioritize areas. When it comes to cleaning and keeping our homes in whatever condition is acceptable for us, we all have that one area that needs to be done and others we just wish were done. Think about the places that cause you the most anxiety and then figure out how to find the time to keep them clean. For us, it's the kitchen and living room and that's what we focus on daily with the bit of time we have for cleaning.
3. Set aside 15-30 minutes a day for cleaning. I admit this works best if there are two of you so you can each tackle something in that time or else you may need two sets of cleaning time if you're going solo. As your kids get older, have them take part in cleaning during that time as well so they can learn how to help out as needed. Crucially, you don't want to be breaking this up throughout the day, but pick the time of day that works for you and have it be regular and in one chunk. The reason is that if you're constantly picking up and cleaning all day, it feels like the never ending job, but if you have this one time where that's what you're doing daily then you know it's coming and accepting the mess before or after is a bit more tolerable. We do this daily after dinner and my husband tackles the kitchen and dishes and I rotate between the living room (always a quick tidy) and then the bathroom and laundry. It's never a perfect job, but things get done and once in a while I even have time to tackle other rooms too or we add in

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vacuuming. I'll be clear, our house probably falls short of a lot of people's expectations, but it's not the worst I've seen and it definitely keeps us more relaxed.

4. Have a messy space for kids. Kids will need places where they can leave their mess overnight or even for days on end. Having spaces they can do this and know that you won't interrupt and spaces you can just ignore can be helpful for everyone. Some people worry that their space is too small for this because they think they need an entire room. If you have an entire room that can be dedicated to being messy until you're ready to go through it with the kids and clean, then great, but if not, it's about putting aside space in public areas. Some people mark it with a gate so it separates the space, some just ad-hoc mark where this space is (e.g., to the left of the sofa) and leave it be. As far as compromises go, this is one that can work well for some families.
5. Minimize what is available to play with. I cannot emphasize this one enough as it benefits adults and kids alike. Yes, kids see tons of creativity in chaos, but if there's too much, it becomes overwhelming for them as well. Kids will be highly creative with less as well (even if they don't pick it up after) and the less there is for them to open up and get into, the easier a tidy can be whenever you choose to do it. I always figure there shouldn't be more available and out than can be cleaned in a 10 minute period. This means rotating toys and storing ones that aren't being used, only bringing new things out when we put other things away. If you find it's starting to take longer to tidy a room, then you've got too much out. Of course, you may have things like painting and modeling clay that are always available but then those are the times to focus on cleaning up right after because it's a set activity, not the toys that our kids use creatively.
6. Get help. This is the hardest for most of us because of the cost. It's not something we have access to here, but I know that it's a huge help for a lot of families who can afford it. It's also something that some families ask for as gifts over holidays. Just one off deep cleans can be expensive but well worth it when we know we don't have the time or capacity to keep up with it all. You can also get creative in doing a group where each month you all go and help one friend with their house and it rotates in order to get everyone's house cleaned a couple times a year by using the power of a group of people working on it; the benefit of social time means it's probably a better experience than just spending that one day a month on your own house and only getting a portion done each time.

And I would be remiss if I didn't mention talking to others about how they handle it, the realities of the mess, and just brainstorming ideas. It has been through friends that many of the solutions that work for us came about, even though not all the solutions we've tried have worked. Just please find like-minded friends to talk to. It's no use talking to someone who doesn't share the same expectations as you, at least at the start. They may have shifted mindsets a bit and that will definitely be helpful to hear, but if you have always cared about being neat and you're talking to someone who never cared, the advice they give likely won't help. Similarly, if your expectations and reality don't include getting help or spending hours cleaning, don't talk to someone where that is how they handle it. I'm not saying this is easy, but when you find the right person, it really will be a help to you to know that you aren't alone and that tornado happens to visit others as well.

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### Bonus Section: The Power of Nature



When thinking about all the things that cause us lots of chaos, we are often looking for that panacea and yet there really isn't one, but there is something that's relatively close: nature. We cannot ignore that we are a species that evolved to exist outside most of the time and that we have moved further and further away from the very real and studied beneficial effects of being in nature. For anyone who has gone camping, the restoration that comes after that trip is palpable or for those who go hiking, it can be described as a high. Nature is the closest thing we have to a panacea, at least from a mental health perspective.

Why does this matter when talking about the house of cards lifestyle that comes with having two kids? Generally because people don't engage with nature as much as they could or even should once we feel this chaos set in. Contrary to what's best for us, we tend to double down at home and try to take greater control ourselves instead of utilizing the power of nature to help us.

So how does nature help?

1. Nature helps us sleep better. More time outside - especially in areas away from congestion and traffic - has a positive impact on calming our minds to prepare for sleep and improves our overall sleep quality. If you're feeling tired and run-down, it can be hard to get up and get out, but yet, getting out to nature can be exactly what you and your kids need to sleep better more generally.
2. Nature is a great space to get that energy out for young kids. That tornado that hits the house and has you feeling overwhelmed can be mitigated when we get that energy out outside. Whether it's a backyard, a park, or a hike, kids who are active outdoors are often happier and more engaged and then when they get home, are less likely to cause chaos because that energy is out. Now, note that we're not talking 30 minutes here, but more like two to three hours outside in a chunk.



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3. Nature can help our kids get along. I'm not sure if it's the wide open space, the abundance of things like sticks to play with (avoiding the battle of "mine"), the calming effect on the brain, or what, but kids generally get along better when out in nature. This is not about backyards though where we often have our own toys and things for our kids to battle over, but truly out in nature where they don't have their stuff. Heading for a forest walk opens up tons of opportunities for our kids to explore together or alongside each other or even separately and get engaged. Fighting often decreases drastically in these moments and we see bonds build as they find ways to explore and be imaginative together.
4. Nature gets us away from the chaos. The mere fact that we are not looking at what needs to be done, what mess has been made, and the various things in the house of cards that make us think it's all about to tip over helps us mentally too. And when we're away for long enough and can have the time to relax and restore ourselves, then we can also return with a fresh set of eyes and a clearer mind as to how we're going to tackle things in the moment and going forward.

In short, if you aren't taking advantage of the nature around you, please consider doing so for everyone's mental health.

***This is the end of Parenting 2.0 – Week 3: The House of Cards***