



Episode #176:

Dr. Jill Emanuele on Handling Sibling Challenges

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Debbie: Hello, Dr. Emanuele, welcome to the podcast.

Jill: Hello. Thanks so much for having me.

Debbie: I am super excited that I found you through the Child Mind Institute, which I've been, you know, I, I share a lot of the resources and great content throughout the Tilt community, and I'm just super excited to be talking about this topic today. But before we get into that, can you just take a few minutes and introduce yourself to the audience and maybe tell us a little bit about the work that you do with the Child Mind Institute?

Jill: For sure. So I'm a child and adolescent psychologist. I am a psychologist that works mainly with what are called evidence based treatments, treatments that have a research background to support the interventions that we do. And I work with children, adolescents and young adults who primarily have mood disorders, so depression, or sometimes even bipolar disorder, or kids whose emotions are really, really big. And we do different kinds of treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy or dialectical behavioral therapy, if you've heard of some of those terms, to help these children. But a lot of those kids, of course, no kid has just one thing that they're dealing with a lot of the time. So we deal with kids who have ADHD and anxiety, kids who are struggling in school, kids who are very gifted and don't know how to deal with social skills, kids who have learning disabilities.

So there's lots of different problems and, and issues that kids are dealing with. My organization is called the Child Mind Institute. We're based in New York City and we are a nonprofit that is dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. So we have a lot of good resources on our website, which is childmind.org and I always encourage people to go there and read them because there's just great stuff on there. And we do a lot of work both with advocacy and also with clinical work as well with children.

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. And again, I, you know, I think Child Mind and Understood are the two resources I refer to the most and there is so much great content on your website. So I'm so happy to be having you on the show to talk about this today. So today we're talking about sibling challenges and my listeners know that I only have one child and so this is, I often weave a lot of my personal experiences into conversations, but I, I can't and, and so I always feel kind of at a loss when this comes up when talking with groups of parents. So I actually threw out to my Facebook community that I was going to be speaking with someone about this and I got a lot of great questions and comments and there are a number of themes and I just kind of wanted to start at the very beginning. One parent wrote that I get more triggered by sibling conflict than anything else. You know, this parent said that she feels she can deal with the child's anger at them, but that

when they're being mean to each other, that is the straw that breaks the camel's back, it's, it tips them over. And this, that was echoed by a lot of people. So can you talk a little bit about what is it specifically about that dynamic between siblings, especially if one's neurotypical and one is atypical that can be so challenging for parents?

Jill: Yeah, I could absolutely give, give some insight into this. So first of all, we know that children, siblings in particular, fight and argue and nag at each other and do little things to annoy each other and there's, especially in families with a lot of siblings, there's certain ones that get on each other's nerves and others that get along. So it really just depends on the dynamics between the siblings. But then I think when you have a child who's neurotypical and a child who has other special needs, that it really creates a whole nother level where parents are like, why is this happening? Why, so and a lot of the time it goes toward the kid who's neurotypical, why are you picking on your, your brother or sister, because you know that they have these needs. Or even sometimes it goes the other way where the child with special needs is, is acting out on their sibling.

And the parent understands maybe why they're doing it but they, it's just their tolerance level has just gotten to the point where it's like, I can't do this anymore. You have to stop this. And so it really, it can be very triggering for a parent. Cause I think underneath the surface, what is it that really is going on? It's about what's the parent's feeling and if it's an out of control feeling a lot of the time like I want, I don't want this to be happening. We already have enough stress. We already have enough going on. Why is this that you have to be doing this now when we're just trying to all like manage every single day. So I think a parent gets tipped over pretty easily, and understandably. So, I think that's some of the stuff that's going on.

Debbie: I wonder too if, and, and I'd love to know if this is something you've seen in your work. You know, a lot of the pain for parents when they're raising a kid who is in some way differently wired comes from that expectation of what their child would be like, not meshing with reality. And so I know so many parents have multiple kids because they really want their kids to have each other, you know, to be best friends and to be supports throughout their lives. And so does that expectation of what they wish it looked like get in the way as well?

Jill: Oh, I think that that's such a huge piece of this. I mean, I think every parent goes into this thinking, okay, this is potentially the way it's going to go and they have dreams and images of what their child's life is going to be like. And when they realize that it's going to be something different, particularly something that presents a lot of limitations or a lot of challenges and they know their child's going to be struggling for the rest of their lives, the last thing they're going to want to be doing is to see that child struggle more on a day to day basis. And some parents are able to, they go at it right away and they're like, okay, there's these differences there. We have to deal with them. And some parents it's harder to deal with that. It's very emotional for them and there's no judgment on either side. And so there's these expectations aren't, you're supposed to act in this way and then they don't. And it's a continued disappointment, it's a continued trigger. And a lot of the work that we do is to really help the parents come to terms with

what the child's strengths are and what their limitations are going to be and then to, to accept them, to really fully accept them so they can move forward not having those false expectations hanging over them.

Debbie: So, okay. There are so many different themes that came up and I'm going to go through some of them. The biggest theme I think is this perpetual challenge about attention. You know, oftentimes the atypical kid requires a lot more and you know, the, I know there are all kinds of metaphors and memes I've seen about what this can look like and how to explain to an NT child why another sibling is, is getting what seems to be more attention or more supports. Can you talk about that and any strategies for parents who are really struggling with wrapping their head around this concept?

Jill: Oh, for sure. Isn't time the biggest problem with all of us, and for parents with, with real challenges, with time, with their kids. Absolutely. It becomes a huge issue every single day. So we know that a child with special needs has more time demands a lot of the time. And so what happens is until the parent picks up on that, that they're actually spending so much time on one child and not another, that other child is definitely not getting as much attention. That being said, once a parent does realize, or maybe they've known it the whole time, I think there's a false expectation that you have to then spend an equal amount of time. And it's not about the quantity, it's about the quality. So what we try to tell parents is that even if you give that other child just 10 minutes a day of an undivided attention where it's not about the phone and it's not about a screen or anything like that where it's truly interactive or just being there, holding them, doing something where it's just them 10 minutes a day and some parents might be 10 minutes is even hard to find and I get that.

But that will do a world of wonder. Parents often will, will go to the point where they say no no I'm not spending all this time and then they don't wind up spending any time. So just to set the bar a little lower and say, you've just got to give them 10 minutes. Maybe it's 10 minutes before they go to bed or you have a particular routine that you do every single night. Maybe it's just that that other child gets to sit next to you at the dinner table or help you make dinner or do something like that where it's, it's very much that kind of undivided attention. It doesn't have to be all fun and games. It can be lots of different tasks. So be creative about it and think about just how can you be with that other child for 10 minutes a day.

Debbie: Yeah, that makes sense. And I can see that's probably just a reframe for a lot of parents to recognize it's, you know, that quantity versus quality piece. Does the same go for, I don't know, maybe jealousy for the NT child because their sibling gets extra supports or extra accommodations or you know whether, maybe it's in sports teams or after school activities or things like that. What might be perceived as a double standard? Is this something that parents should be talking openly with the kids about? So they kind of understand the reasons why these things are happening or how, how should parents handle that?

Jill: Yes, absolutely. You want to talk to your children about it all the time. You want to make sure that they understand. It's never too early to start talking about who

their sibling is and what their sibling can do and what their sibling can't do. And they have to of course talk about it in an appropriate developmental way. But some siblings may not understand what's happening with their brother or sister. They also sometimes may feel guilty that they've done something wrong or they somehow caused it or they may even feel like they're not as important because they don't get as much attention. You want to be having some conversation with your child about this and ongoing so they understand why there is a difference here. And part of talking to them about it is listening and hearing what they have to say about it rather than just saying it's, you know, of course you're important. Of course your brother or your sister has this issue that you don't have. You want to say, oh, how do you feel about that? What do you, what do you understand about what Johnny is dealing with? Do you know why we have to spend an hour going to this appointment this day? This is why we have to go to this appointment. So those are some of the things that parents can do.

Debbie: Okay. All right. I want to get to like what I would consider to be one of the biggest questions and maybe the toughest question. I'm super curious to hear what you would say. I hear from a lot of parents about kids who their relationship with their sibling has really suffered. Maybe there's trauma involved, you know, that sibling might've been the recipient of a lot of aggressive or, or big or scary behavior. How do you begin to repair that? You know, I think maybe this is a two prong question. In the moment do you have ideas about how to keep kids safe or give the neurotypical kids or both kids strategies in those hard, combative situations? And then how do we go about repairing when there has been some real damage done to the dynamic?

Jill: That's a very challenging question, isn't it? There's a lot of different ways I can answer it too because I think it depends on the situation. So I'll try to give something very general, but I think it's really gonna depend. So what happens is there are definitely situations in which there is arguing, fighting, even some aggression, things getting thrown, people getting punched, things that are very scary, that happen. And in the moment, the first priority of course is to make sure everybody stays safe. So that may mean to separate kids from each other, make sure one's in one room, one's in another, to make sure that everybody calms down and everybody's emotions are lower before any kind of consequences are given for behavior. And it's really important that consequences are given. You know, so we, we always say we want to praise a child when they, they do well. And we also want to make sure that we give appropriate consequences when they, there's something they've not done well and they need to learn.

So, so that would be the second part of handling it is to be able to, once all the emotions have calmed down, to have everybody sit together and talk about, if possible, this may not always be possible, what happened and what could be different next time. And to make sure that consequences are given. I think for the siblings that are struggling with their other siblings that are having these difficulties, there's a number of different ways I think you can go about addressing it. One again, is to have those conversations with them at another time. Some siblings go into therapy themselves to get some support. There are

also, in some places, some sibling support groups for children with special needs or sibling support groups.

You know, they have sibling support groups for kids who have medical disorders like cancer or something like that. So there are sometimes other support groups for siblings. I think it's also that one thing that can happen with during these periods is, is that if there's been a rupture, a real traumatic event, that it's hard to get back to normal routine. It's really important to get back into your normal routine as fast as you can so kids can get back to what they know and expect so they feel safe. So those are some of the things that come to mind right away.

Debbie: And then in terms of healing that relationship, I can imagine that parents may feel an obligation or, or pressure, to really try to fix things. And I guess I'm wondering what's realistic to expect going back again to the, the sibling who might be the recipient of the aggressive behavior or be kind of recovering from some trauma. I'm assuming we don't want to force them to be a certain way or feel a certain way toward their sibling who they might be still feeling hurt. So what should we expect and how can we help our kids heal from that kind of trauma?

Jill: Yeah this is, this is so tricky, isn't it? I think it's really gonna depend on the family and the situation and the particular kids involved. But one of the things I see parents do sometimes is they expect the apologies to be flying right away, when they're not ready to be given. And one of the things that I think really can hinder is that when you force an apology before it's genuine. And so the child who had the blow up may really believe that they were wronged in some way and don't really compute that their actions were not appropriate. So then the parent is saying, you have to say sorry to your sibling. And they're like, no. Or they do it because they think they have to, but they don't really mean it. So the first thing I would say is to, to really wait until the apologies can be genuine.

Sometimes you may want to teach your children to, once, again, the emotions have gone down, to maybe do something nice for the other sibling or maybe the apology letter can be written or something along that line. But something, what you really want to overall demonstrate is that it can't be just swept under the rug and we're going to move on and we're going to pretend that that didn't happen. You want there to be an expectation that there will be a conversation, as much as the child is able to do it. It may be just the child who had the blow up listening to the other, to the siblings say, you hurt me and not having to say anything back. It may be that the child who was wronged actually has to sit down and listen to an apology when they're maybe having some hard time doing it or maybe they wait until there's, there's a time when both people feel ready. But, so there's a lot of different possibilities but again, the biggest point is to say don't sweep it under the rug because it also creates a sense of, where there's not safety cause they know it's going to happen again. And they're like, well let me just wait until the next blow up. And then they're living in a state of uncertainty and lack of safety.

Debbie: Yeah. I, and I, I love that advice about not forcing the apologies 'cause I think that's kind of a default for so many parents. Right? Like say you're sorry and you just want to kind of move on. But I guess what I'm hearing is that too, this is a

process like, like everything is with raising differently wired kids. Like this is something that's going to take time and a lot of conversations and we shouldn't expect kind of quick fixes when we're trying to foster better relationships with, with our kids.

Jill: For sure.

Debbie: Yeah. Okay. So alright. So here's another question that came up a lot and it is regarding younger siblings mimicking an older sibling's behavior. There's a lot of concern about them copying, you know, just immature or aggressive behavior or that they're going to normalize that because that's what they're seeing, their older sibling being rude or explosive. So any thoughts on that and how to prevent that from becoming their new normal?

Jill: Yes, many. So first of all, one of the things we have to recognize is that it's so typical for any child to mimic the behavior of, especially an older sibling, right? So it certainly, that in and of itself can be very cute. And there'll be lots of examples where it's like, oh, that's adorable. That's funny. But then it's not, when it's, when it's a negative behavior. So the most effective way a parent can address this is again, to give appropriate consequences and consistently. So when a child is being rude, both children get a consequence. So the child that has special needs basically has some sort of outburst or is rude in some way. There's a, there's an action taken to remedy it. And then the, the child who is copying sees that and knows that if you do this, you get a consequence. Maybe I shouldn't do this.

And then they'll test cause that's what they do. To see if you're gonna do it with them. And then you give the, maybe not the exact same consequence because it may depend on the age and developmental level and certainly the child itself, but something that will tell the child, nope, not acceptable. So that, it's how you do that. Now, one of the things I'm going to say right out is that parents are exhausted and it's really hard sometimes to be that consistent in giving these consequences and addressing these behaviors. And we're really, really aware of that. So you do the best you can do, you do the best you can and really understand that you have to tackle it on both ends to make sure that the copying gets addressed.

Debbie: That's great advice. So, okay, here's another one. And I'm wondering if you have any kind of specific language that might be supportive. Parents want to know how exactly to talk to their NT child about what's going on with the atypical child, especially if those kids are, the NT kids are really young. And so do you have any specific thoughts on how to have those conversations?

Jill: Yeah. I'm going to share a perspective that may be a little different and go from there. I have friends who have a child with pretty significant special needs and then they have a younger son. And one of the things that they've done, I've noticed, is that they've demonstrated that their life is their life and that the way their life works is around the child with special needs. And that younger child has just adapted really nicely because that's his life and that's what he knows. And so I think the, the younger ones particularly, what they are seeing is their world. So we think that we have to explain to them that there's a difference here and all

that kind of stuff. But really, I mean, assuming there's no like major aggression or anything that's really going to affect the younger child in some kind of way.

Really I think the first thing you have to do is recognize, to see it through your child's eyes and see what they're actually seeing. And at some point down the road when they start to ask questions, when they say, okay, they're noticing the differences, that's when you start having the conversations. That's when you start to say, okay, yeah, this is where we're different from other people. This is what your, your brother or sister is, is dealing with on a day to day basis. But before that, just see it through their eyes, see that they may not be seeing the differences that you or other people see. So that, that's one way I would address it. I think it's important that with labels in particular, it depends on how the, the labels are used. If people are very much pro labels and use it as a source of pride and use it as a way to, to define and join a community and be a tribe in some kind of way, then use the labels. If not, then do it the way you feel is best for your family, I guess is the best way I would say it.

Debbie: Yeah. I love that answer that the younger kids may not be seeing the differences and to really think about it from their perspective because I really think that younger kids, especially when they're in the toddler/preschool years, they may notice difference, but they don't ascribe good or bad to it. It's just, it is what it is. So that's a really great reminder. So it makes me think of another question and I, I've heard this from other parents that sometimes their one child feels an extra responsibility to protect or defend or have their, their atypical sibling's back in public spaces or in school and things like that. And they are concerned that that is a burden to their NT child. Do you have any thoughts on that?

Jill: Yeah, I, I think that actually does happen sometimes, especially when the kids get into the, the world. I think the kid, the NT child, typically sometimes often takes a protective role either in the family or even in school or in the community in some kind of way where they feel like they know there's a difference. They know that their sibling is more vulnerable in some kind of way and they need to protect them. And as a result, I've heard situations where there would be a child with special needs who, in like the fourth grade and they were brought down to their younger sibling's classroom in the first grade who is the NT child in order to calm them down. Like I've heard situations like that. And so I think what would be important is to recognize that if that child is feeling that sense of protection to again talk to them and reassure them that they're not really responsible for that and that they are responsible for taking care of themselves and that you're very proud of them for looking out for their sibling.

And we all want to look out for each other but they don't have to protect them. The parents are the ones doing the protecting. The other thing that happens sometimes is that the NT child feels like they have to be perfect because the special needs child isn't if you will. And so they, they have to be as perfect and well-behaved as possible and as a result there might be some perfectionism that happens or over, you know, being really good when they're not necessarily feeling that way. So you really want to try to tell kids to, not to put some pressure, so much pressure on themselves that they have to be themselves

somehow to make up for that loss in the family or that the other child is having certain struggles.

Debbie: That's super interesting. It makes sense. I hadn't thought of that but I could see how easily that would happen. And so your answer to the question too about NT kids identifying as protectors of their siblings. I'm just going to ask you this, maybe it's just restating what you just said, but because this specifically was a question that came up, should parents enlist their NT children to be resources or supports for their atypical siblings or it sounds to me from your answer that we do not want them to feel any responsibility for playing that role.

Jill: I think honestly it's going to depend on the situation. Sometimes the NT kid is the older one, in which case it's just natural that there would be some kind of helping out in families with all neurotypical children. So I, I do think it's going to depend on the situation. There's going to be situations where maybe the kid does have to help and also helping can be a sense of pride. Like if a child is in a wheelchair for example, and needs to be pushed or something like that, that could absolutely be something that would be very helpful. Or maybe you can help go get the supplies with mom that you need to get for your sibling. Maybe that child really enjoys playing games with the, the child with special needs and that's the way they contribute. So I think it just depends on, on the situation. You gotta look at it from both perspectives.

Debbie: That makes total sense. So, okay. You've answered so many of the questions in your answers, which is great. I think this is going to be such helpful information for listeners, but one of the things that people want to know is if their kids have such different interests and are just very different personality types, you know, there's a concern of wanting them to get along. So any suggestions, ideas, about how to help them get along or maybe find common ground or maybe it goes back to that question, what should our goals be in terms of their relationship with each other?

Jill: Right. Okay. I can think of this from two different perspectives. You want there to be a joining, you want the kids to get along or have something in common that they can be together with and you also want them to have their independent lives, right? So what, what can be done? I think, in any family, think about this, there always seems to be the, especially when you have a number of siblings, the two that are complete opposites, right? Who don't have anything in common, who don't really get along in certain ways, or don't really just spend time together. So I think the way you can start this process is by having the family be doing something together. If you're really going to try and join the kids, having everybody do something together that's an activity. And then maybe the parents can get creative and do something where you have to split the kids up into doing different tasks for a bigger goal.

But you want to try to introduce ways in which they can get to know each other on a different level, if you will. Or maybe you just find that one thing that they have in common that maybe they both liked to color. Maybe they both like to bounce the ball outside. Maybe they both like watching YouTube videos for 15 minutes, you know, or a half an hour or even longer.

Debbie: Or a day!

Jill: Or a day. Right, let's be realistic! And so if like, you know, you don't want your kids watching YouTube videos all the time, but if that's what they both enjoy, then maybe you can say, okay, why don't you show your brother three of the videos that you like and you show your sister three videos that they like and they can watch them together and see if that works. You've got to try different things to try and get them. And also you have to respect that just, sometimes people aren't going to be as close as other people just naturally. And so, honor that. You know, some kids are going to get along better than others, but as long as they're engaging with each other in some kind of way and they're not just ignoring each other 24/7, that's something.

Debbie: Awesome. So, okay, I wanna just ask you then are, you know, I feel like we've talked about comparisons and resentment and respectful relationships and, and some of the major themes in your work in, in working with families and kids. Are there any common sibling dynamic challenges that we didn't talk about that you would want to make sure we cover in this episode?

Jill: That's a great question. So we've gotten the ones that really get along and protect each other a lot, the ones that don't get along. You know, we can talk just a tiny bit about single children and then there's also the kids that are in like families with lots of kids. I would say with, with kids who are only children it's important, especially if they're a child with special needs, it's really important, if you're a parent with special needs or of a child with special needs that you have your tribe and your community. So your podcast and other communities that are here to support and give guidance and, and just community and tribe, that's super important. But your children need that too. So, if it's an only child to be able to find some sort of community or tribe for them in a similar kind of way so that they have that ability to really have those interactions that they wouldn't, they don't necessarily have with a sibling.

But there's also benefits to being an only child for sure. And in terms of other dynamics, I would say that there are some times with kids as special needs where the, the other kid will try to pretend or imitate that there's, they have something wrong with them and then they start to act out in different ways or even the same way and to be able to say, well, you get all this attention for being, having something wrong with you, I must have something wrong with me then. And so you have to address that dynamic as well because you want them to really feel like, hey, you know what you're great the way you are and I'm going to give you the attention that you need for being who you are. So that can get really difficult sometimes.

Debbie: And does that then just go back to making sure that you are having that quality time with your child and making sure that they're getting the reinforcement they need for who they are?

Jill: Yeah, it goes to that and also learning just as much as you want to praise behaviors, you also want to ignore behaviors that you don't want to see anymore.

So if they start acting in a certain way you know is not their thing, you ignore it, you don't respond to it. We call it active ignoring and it's, it's a very powerful tool because then they realize they're not going to get attention for that, for doing something that's not really about them.

Debbie: Active ignoring. Okay. That is going to be my word of the week. I kind of love that.

Jill: Label praise and active ignoring. Those are the two words you want to know.

Debbie: That was awesome. Okay, great. Well thank you so much. This has been super interesting. We covered a lot and I just so appreciate your expertise in this area. I know this is going to be very helpful. I'll be curious to hear what followup questions I get from this episode, because again, this is a topic that people are really hungry for more resources on, so thank you for taking the time to, to combine and share this with us.

Jill: Oh, my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Child Mind Institute](#)
- [Dr. Jill Emanuele](#)
- [Author and Parent Educator Julie King Talks About Sibling Dynamics](#) (podcast episode)
- [Siblings Under Stress](#) (article on Child Mind)