



Episode 8: Siblings
with Karen Willcocks from Karitane

Siblings

We discuss some tools and tips to assist in preparing a sibling for the arrival of another child.

Tiffany: Hi everyone. Well, today we're lucky enough to be joined by Karitane Kaz, AKA Karen Wilcox. Karen is a Clinical Nurse Educator at Karitane and features on their social media lives regularly so you may recognise her reassuring and calming voice. This week's episode is all about introducing a new sibling into the family. We'll discuss some helpful advice on how to prepare your little one for a new arrival, which can be a big change for the whole family. Welcome to our podcast, Karen, so lovely to have you on today.

Karen: Thank you, Tiffany. It's a pleasure to be here, and it's nice to see you again.

Tiffany: Lovely to see you too. So Karen, to start off our discussion today, how can we best prepare children for the arrival of new siblings? I think that could be a really challenging time as we said for everyone, so if you could just take us through some preparation for families.

Karen: One of the important things is just to make sure we include children in a conversation about when you're having a child. I guess, generally after the pregnancy is well established, not too early in the pregnancy, but say maybe even midway when you're starting to show and thinking about some of the changes that might be happening in your family, like moving house perhaps. Or you might be even thinking about changing them to a toddler bed and moving them into a different room. All of those things is it's good to put some context to the little toddler around why that might be happening.

The conversation that you might have with a toddler wouldn't be in this overexcited kind of way, or even in an underwhelming and not even talking about it kind of way. But it's more like oh, hey buddy, or Tom, or Susie or whatever, you know what's going to be happening? We're having a new family member, join our family, as an example. And part of that is you're going to get to enjoy having a brother or sister. You might even use picture books. You might have other family members that have had a new birth of a baby and you could refer to that to give some context about all of this.



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Karen: (cont...) But the actual moving of rooms or moving house, not necessarily to attribute that to the baby, because sometimes then if it was a difficult experience for the toddler is kind of like the baby's fault.

So, it's good. Do you know what I mean? Like oh, it's time to move to a big bed. That's what happens. Just like mummy and daddy have got a big bed, you're moving into a big bed now, but it's not because of the baby. We're going to move house so we've all got more space. Our family's growing, but it's not because of the baby as such.

Think about some of the resources you might have available for the toddler. That might be picture books. That might be even getting a little dolly and saying oh, you've got your little baby and those sorts of things. Those things are available so that they can understand it and do some of their own role play, and feel like they are connecting to the baby. Because often when babies arrive sometimes it's easier to talk as if they're going to have a new playmate, but really when a newborn comes we don't want them picking them up and playing with them. You want to start a relationship, but they're not a new play toy, but their dolly could be the new play toy.

So it's like parallel play, that sort of thing, rather than thinking this baby is going to be this just awesome friend that can do all these things with the toddler. Then they get into trouble then because they're touching them and wanting to hold them and there's been an expectation that really, in real life, we often are quite cautious about supervising them and making sure they're not just automatically picking up and using them as a toy.

Tiffany: Yeah, that makes so much sense. And I think when you're saying to prepare them with the toys, like a doll, and introducing that idea of a new family member coming into the home and how that might be for them, I think, like you said, great advice around having some tools in place and talking about it, leading up to it. It'd probably be similar if you had a dog, for example, doing some training with them around a bit of separation or a bit of setting those boundaries in place and things like that, I'm sure would be some of those things you'd need to think about.



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Karen: I guess, knowing too that trying to put ourselves in our children's shoes. There was an awesome book written a few years ago now by Lady Gowrie Childcare Services. It was called In Their Shoes.

It talks a lot about what it is like to be like a two-year-old or a three-year-old and suddenly have to come to terms with a new person entering the family. They liken some of the examples to how would you feel if your partner brought home another woman and said I love them just as much as you? Do you know what I mean? Those kinds of things. And you think well, I don't think that's great.

So sometimes we use ways of explaining the introduction of a new family member, but there is some level of uncertainty, isn't there, about what does this mean for me and my relationship with my mum or dad? Of course, they're not thinking in that adult way. But there's often we all have that sense of needing to feel the same level of acceptance and connection, and spending quality time with mum dad because that's obviously going to be taken up caring for the baby, a lot of that. So there's something also about realizing well, when the baby comes I'm still going to have to quarantine some quality time with my toddler so that there's this real one-on-one and it's not just almost just on the fly. That it's really purposeful, that we're going to spend really nice time together and it's focused on them and not even about trying to squeeze them in between feeds or anything like that. And taking turns with them with both relationships so they still feel really connected.

Tiffany: Yeah. That's great advice. And I think, like you said with... I remember with my kids it was challenging, particularly when I had the third come along because you feel like you're stretched in many, many ways. But I guess, like you said, having that purposeful time and just really making sure that, if you're lucky enough to have two parents, making sure that one of them is spending that quality time with the other children where possible, and that you're really just making that special time and having that special connection at certain times throughout the day. And making that specific purposeful time for them, I think is great advice. Absolutely.

So, I think everyone's heard of sibling rivalry there, Karen, but can you tell everyone or clarify with everyone a little bit more about what it is and what actually causes it in little one's minds?



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Karen: I guess I started to think about that when I introduced this idea of what would we feel like if we had to share a partner with somebody that came home and said don't worry, I still love you but I've got this other person now as well. Some of us might be really threatened by that. And so, for little people, I guess, there's a couple of things that happen there. Their world has been that they're the center of their parents world often, and they have this undivided attention. You have more time, you have more energy. Suddenly now, even throughout the pregnancy if you've had a difficult pregnancy, that's separating in terms of the relationship changes because if mum has been unwell physically or maybe even been in hospital, there've been some separations from that.

That's quite difficult for a toddler whose emotional regulation is still developing. They can't use reason. Not until you're around three or to six years of age do they learn emotional regulation and reasoning. And so, there's a sense of... Their brain actually can't comprehend things the same as an adult brain can so we have to just understand they might have reactions. We're questioning well, I wonder what this is about? They might like, don't go mummy, or I still love you, or they might push the baby away once they've arrived. This is about feeling 'where do I fit into my mum and dad or mum or dad's world?' Like am I now displaced? Am I still important? Am I still the apple of their eye? And I'm not coping and so the obvious equation is this person has come and suddenly my whole world is changed, and I'm not happy about it.

Sometimes they do really act out. Children who really struggle with it as if their language is not fully developed, they haven't got the words, they might have a very physical response to distress, so they might... I have seen little ones pick up a shoe and throw it at the person holding the baby. They might do things, but this is them expressing I don't know where I stand. I'm not coping with this adjustment. I don't know how to manage. And underlying all of that is this sense of do I still have a place? Have I still got a sense of belonging? Am I still connected in the same way? So, it's trying to work out well, how can I give them that? Yeah, you have to meet your baby's needs, don't you?

Tiffany: I totally agree with all that. I think, in my personal situation, I actually had my son who was a bit delayed with his speech. He had a few issues with being able to express himself so he didn't talk until quite late.



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Tiffaney: (cont...) So it was really challenging for him because my older daughter, she did speak a lot, very much a little chatterbox, and she was able to express herself. She'd often even speak for him or say he's trying to say this, or he's trying to say that. And so when we had the third one come along he really struggled with being able to communicate how he was feeling and often would act out in his actions and other ways because he couldn't communicate what he wanted to say, I guess.

He was only quite young, so there's 21 months between my third and my second so it was really challenging for a while because he wasn't able to connect in any way or communicate, I guess, in any way that way so it was about finding other ways to communicate with him. It was a really challenging time, but we got through it and as you do, as parents, you find ways. Books were really great with spending time, sitting down and looking at books and talking about feelings and things like that. So it can be a challenging time. It's great that you've, I guess, highlighted some of those feelings that might be real for those toddlers at that time.

Karen: Yes. It can also bring up really strong feelings for families too, like for parents, because sometimes we've all got our own lived experience of our own sibling relationships if we've got siblings ourselves. We might even still be holding some of those memories where it didn't work out or maybe we felt like we were... People make jokes or reference to, I guess, things like oh, they're the middle child. Because there's that real sense of we're all trying to get a sense of identity and belonging and we're trying to work out well, what does it all mean when this happens? I guess the capacity of parents to manage their own feelings as well, or feel like oh, why is my child acting like this? I was trying to raise happy, loving children. Some people have turned this acting out physically, hurting or chasing down their siblings and you think what is going on? Where did this come from?

But I think don't lose hope. I think that happens. And it can seem surprising when you are creating a really... You're doing your best to be a good enough parent, but these things happen. It's more about, well, how do we respond to that? So some of the things that we could do is acknowledge, as you said, those emotions. You might say, "Hey buddy. You know we've got to be careful with baby. He's still little. He's got to learn to manage. He's going to take a little while to be able to talk." "You can hold him but I'm going to have to help you hold him so he stays safe."



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Karen: (cont...) Or, “You can hold him but I’m going to have to help you hold him so he stays safe.”

So focus on the important things, like baby’s still learning how to communicate or things like I can see you’re really upset and you wanted to hold him or carry him because they often try and drag the baby off your lap, or they want to pick them up off the floor. You might be thinking what are you doing? No, put him down. They think I’ve got this new sibling. I thought we were going to be friends, and now if I go near him I’m in trouble.

So I guess it’s trying to explain what they can do. That’s when you would be introducing other things. “How about you show baby Tom how you build blocks? How about you show baby you’re such a good big brother. He’s going to learn so much from you.” You’re almost giving them a role in the family and a way of relating that’s useful and meaningful. It’s often very valued by mums. Remember children just want to have a sense of belonging, acceptance, and feel valued in their family. Do you know what I mean? So if we find ways to create that then they’re going to feel more like oh, this is okay. I can do this. My parents still think I’m awesome. This is great.

Tiffany: And that’s what we all want for them. We want to feel that connectedness. We want to feel the harmonious feeling. We don’t want to have these issues where one of them is feeling really left out or what have you, so I think it’s great. It’s good that you’ve highlighted some ideas around how parents can help avoid these situations and clarify that, and how it can clearly affect both children, I think, coming into it.

Is there anything else that you could give tips on how to avoid this sibling rivalry? Because I think any tips are going to be useful here, Karen.

Karen: Some of the things that we would say for mums or dads just to think about making a mental list of. Especially a young child under three, for instance, gets fixated on something. Say you’re breastfeeding or bottle feeding, or whatever you’re doing, and you’re preoccupied with the baby. Then your toddler comes in and wants your attention. Rather than saying “Not now, I’m doing this with the baby.”



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Karen: (cont...) Think of ways that you can actually notice them even if you're settling. Sometimes we worry that talking and trying to settle a baby, for instance, means a baby will never learn to sleep. But that's actually not true. Babies are reassured by a calm parent voice and will sleep even with toddlers in the room, and other people in the room, as long as they feel like their room is all under control. We're all okay. So sometimes, I guess, all we have to do is say, "Oh, we're using our quiet voice."

I often will tell parents to bend down beside the cot, but still make eye contact with their toddler because the baby just needs your hand and your quiet voice. Doesn't matter about the words really. And you're talking to your toddler and say, "Oh, do you know where your red truck is?" Or, "Hey, I haven't seen dolly for a while." So you're going to send them on missions that they can go and find a toy. It's not about the baby because you haven't even mentioned the baby. They're just distracting them with an activity and you're not rejecting them or pushing them away because you're preoccupied with needing to get the baby to sleep or I've got a feed.

So you have a mental list of what are the things I can give some attention that I don't have to leave what I'm doing, but he or she still feels like mum's engaging, and I can do these little activities. I can go, "Oh, good on you. You found that." Now you might get a collection of things you absolutely don't want, but you can just keep it in a little basket and you can pack those up at the end of the day. It doesn't matter. But it means then the child's got something to do, something to distract themselves and feel like mum still sees me. Mum still knows or dads still knows. And I've done something that I can praise them for. Say, "Oh, good on you. Aren't you clever? You found that toy. Wonder how it works." You can coach them to do activities, and you're not making it about the baby so much.

Tiffany: Yeah, that's great. So are there some things typically that do affect that firstborn? Like you've mentioned a few things there, but would you say there's a top five things that do tend to, I guess, affect that first born when the new baby comes?

Karen: The risk is that if we protect the baby so much from the toddler that they don't get a chance to play on the floor safely and do their physical development.



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Karen: (cont...) If they feel actually if we're not protecting them enough, so sometimes setting up furniture and creating a safe place and maintaining that could be in a play area that's set up for the baby, so they can roll around without fear of being jumped on or trod on or something like that. Being with them, so they do get to know each other and they're building their own relationship because they do need help to develop that together. Because, I guess, stress for anybody is not good for our wellbeing, and little babies can feel stressed. Protecting their sleep time so that they're more easy going, I guess. Sleep really affects all of us, so it's a little baby and they need to have their sleep protected. So sometimes even putting a bell on the infant's bedroom door, and here's when you're getting break-ins from the toddler, who goes to wake the baby or jump in with them, things like that.

And I guess the other thing that can happen for the toddler as well or different age children, the answer is that they grow. They usually have different developmental milestone stages. So for instance, a three-year-old's play is all about building up. So creating a little say, Duplo village or a Barbie doll collection or creating things and building things up. But for children that are say, 18 months or 12 months, they're into knocking it down and pulling it down. So creating times in the day where the baby does his baby play and talking about oh no, babies need to play this and these are his toys and he's going to have his special playtime. But actually then you're going to protect it for the older child that they're going to have their special playtime. And that might mean they sit up at a table so the baby can come and knock down their creations because they've got different developmental needs and they get really frustrated if they're not allowed to be themselves either, the toddler. We're always protecting the baby, but we don't think about protecting the needs of the toddler or preschooler.

Tiffaney: I remember with my first, when we had the second, she was very much wanting to come into our bed and not wanting to sleep in her bed as much. So there was a bit of regression there. There were a few toilet training issues and things when the third baby came. So are those sort of things quite typical, they find that those things happen?

Karen: Oh, yeah. Yeah, that's right. They will regress. And I guess again, it's funny when you said that about your little one coming into your bed, and that can happen.

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Karen: (cont...) And when you are tired with the baby you might think oh gosh, all right. You might let that happen a couple of nights and then think what have I done? I guess, when we know why they might be doing this, why they might be progressing in one area, because when they've got to actually develop, in say, emotional development to cope with the adjustment of a new baby, then they'll often regress in another area.

So if you're surging in one area of development then something else will drop off a bit. That's kind of normal until it balances out and everything progresses again.

And I guess, especially with the sleep and settling then it might be saying all right, you can have one night cuddles. And I know you're having a hard time, but it's time to come back to bed. You might be better off just spending more time settling them back in their bed rather than letting them start the habit, because it's hard to get them out once you've got there. Because in a way we're reinforcing, we're saying you've got every reason to be distressed and upset, but really it's just a normal process of getting used to another person in your home. It doesn't really warrant saying you have to now sleep with mum and dad because that's the only way I'm going to get my needs met. That can send mixed messages, can't it? So I guess, if you're meeting the needs in another way during the day, understanding it might affect their sleep, but if you want good sleep then you're going to have to help them accept that it's still time to go to bed in their bed. It just might take a bit more work to do that.

Tiffany: Yeah well, I remember with my son too, second time around, so when I had the third, I was really trying to prepare him for self settling before the third baby, the last baby came along.

Karen: Yeah, right.

Tiffany: So I was trying to really spend a lot of time getting him to self settle because he went through a period where he needed me to be in the room when he was going to sleep, either patting him to bed or rocking him to sleep and that sort of thing. So it took quite a while to get him out of that. I was quite heavily pregnant until it came to the time finally when he was able to self-soothe and get himself off to sleep.



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Tiffaney: (cont...) So I remember that was a bit of a challenge, but it definitely paid off. And I'm so glad I did spend that time getting that sorted before the new baby came, because I wouldn't have been able to do both at that point in time because he wanted to be with mum. That was that thing before bed, was needing mum a lot. So it took quite a while. I was laying beside the bed on a mattress with my hand on his chest and then slowly progressing out of the room night by night, getting further and further away, and just using my voice. So, I remember that was really challenging for a couple of weeks, but I'm so glad I was persistent and stuck with it.

Karen: Yeah, yeah. I think you're right. I mean, that is the best time to do it before the second one or third one arrives.

The other really nice thing is when children are going through something like moving house and adjustment or starting preschool, which can happen when you've just had a baby, their development is ready to start to move out. They've got two things. They're learning to socialize more external to the home environment, but they've also got this 'what does this mean?' Am I being replaced at home? And they can get well, what's happening? Am I missing out? Almost like a FOMO. So they've got a big adjustment.

But I guess too, what happens before bed is thinking about, especially with toddlers and preschoolers, is having that time factored into go rather than rushing that process and using it, almost like how do we reconnect before bedtime at night and make sure we're okay. Like I'm okay and you're okay before you go to sleep. That would be not just a bath, story and bed and the task of getting them ready, but it's like a little cuddle and conversation around you might tell them, "Oh, we've had a tough day today. We had a few tough times, didn't we?" Or, "You had a busy day and you had a lot of upsets today. You know mummy or daddy," whoever it is, "we love you."

You want to reconnect and build that relationship again, because it's easy to have conflict or tensions or breakdowns in communication. But if every day you're reconnecting and helping them feel like, you know what? No matter what happens we're okay. It's much easier to sleep well, because these things are playing in the back of their mind. Even if they, of course, wouldn't have the words, they wouldn't have the cognitive understanding but they have the feelings.



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Karen: (cont...) And so we can reassure them with the nice cuddles, gentle words. We don't pretend it's not happening. We just, in simple language, talk about, "Oh, we've had a tough day today. You know mummy or daddy still loves you."

Even there's books about siblings getting along with their baby brother or sister, and that could be good ways to have conversations to help them adjust emotionally to that change.

Tiffany: No, that's great. So lastly, I guess, what I want to just cover off for everyone listening today is just some general tips and tricks to use when introducing a sibling or baby to the family, Karen, because I think we've covered lots today. But, I guess, just to finish off so people have these at the top of their mind.

Karen: So part of your pregnancy time is letting them know that there's a new family member coming, and in an enthusiastic but not in an over the top way.

The other one is make sure you're planning for some one-on-one time with your toddler and other children. That doesn't have to be a long time. We're talking five minutes a day of focused attention, with anyone, usually fills their cup. You know what I mean? It doesn't have to be really extensive time spent.

Having a list of activities that you can do while you're distracted with caring for your baby, so that you're still engaging with the toddler that they could do. And that might be a felt board in the nursery while you're settling. Play with toys, like soft books, dollies, and not being afraid to still talk just because you're settling or feeding your baby. Just using your voice in a calm way will calm your baby, but it will also keep the toddler calmer. So not losing that sense of feeling like oh my. I can't manage all this. Our voice usually escalates. So thinking about your voice and those sorts of things.

And also realizing that it's okay to protect your baby, to have space for their development, but equally your older child needs space and appropriate activities and engagement for their development. They're not going to be the same. They actually can't be interacting in the same way as when they're like two and three. So how you do that conversation about we're going to be keeping baby safe.



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Karen: (cont...) So I remember that was a bit of a challenge, but it definitely paid off. And I'm so glad I did spend that time getting that sorted before the new baby came, because I wouldn't have been able to do both at that point in time because he wanted to be with mum. That was that thing before bed, was needing mum a lot. So it took quite a while. I was laying beside the bed on a mattress with my hand on his chest and then slowly progressing out of the room night by night, getting further and further away, and just using my voice. So, I remember that was really challenging for a couple of weeks, but I'm so glad I was persistent and stuck with it.

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Karen: (cont...) We can gently... Using the word gently a lot is helpful. We can gently hug the baby. Mummy's going to sit with you, or daddy.

Tiffany: Yeah. Wonderful. Well, thanks again for your wonderful support for all the parents listening today, Karen. It's been so helpful, so thank you so much.

Karen: Thank you, Tiffany. It's been a pleasure.

Tiffany: It's been so great.

So if you're looking for more support with regards to bringing a new member of the family home and introducing them to their siblings, or any other pressing parenting questions, you can head over to www.karitane.com.au. Follow them on those socials, or you can call the Karitane Careline on 1300 227 464.