

## PEER RELATIONS

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# Sibling Relations and Their Impact on Children's Development

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### Introduction

The majority of children around the world have at least one sibling. The sibling relationship is likely to last longer than any other relationship in one's lifetime and plays an integral part in the lives of families. Yet, in comparison to the wealth of studies on parent-child relationships, relatively little attention has been devoted to the role of siblings and their impact on one another's development. In recent decades, research has focused on sibling relations in early childhood, and the shift from examining the role of structural variables (e.g., age, birth order) towards more process variables (e.g., understanding of their social worlds) has proved to be a fruitful direction. Siblings are viewed as an integral component of family systems<sup>1,2</sup> and as an important context for learning and development<sup>3</sup> but there are a number of methodological and conceptual challenges to studying siblings from this perspective.

### Subject

In early childhood, four major characteristics of sibling relations are prominent.<sup>2,4</sup> First, sibling interactions are emotionally charged relationships defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Second, sibling relations are defined by intimacy: as youngsters spend large amounts of time playing together, they know each other very well. This long history and intimate knowledge translates into opportunities for providing emotional and instrumental support for one another,<sup>7,8</sup> engaging in pretend play,<sup>9,10,11</sup> for conflict,<sup>12,13,14</sup> and for understanding others' points of view.<sup>15-19</sup> Third, sibling relations are characterized by large individual differences in the quality of children's relations with one another.<sup>1,2,4,6</sup> Fourth, the age difference between siblings often makes the issues of power and control<sup>20,21</sup> as well as rivalry and jealousy<sup>22,23,24</sup> sources of contention for children, but also provide a context for more positive types of complementary exchanges, such as teaching, helping,<sup>2,25-30</sup> and caregiving interactions.<sup>31-33</sup> Broadly speaking, the characteristics of sibling relations sometimes make them challenging for parents, because of the potentially

emotional and highly charged nature of the relationship. One issue that arises due to age differences is differential parental treatment.<sup>34,35</sup>

## Problems

There are a number of methodological issues that plague the sibling literature. Birth order and age differences are confounded in many studies, thus it is challenging to distinguish between role and developmental differences.<sup>14</sup> Recruiting families with young children and collecting data at home can be time-consuming, yet provides rich naturalistic data. Middle-class sibling dyads have generally been studied and therefore we know little about families with more than two children, single-parent families,<sup>36</sup> from different socioeconomic groups,<sup>3</sup> or from non-Western families,<sup>37,38</sup> although there have been some studies of Mexican-American families.<sup>39,40,41</sup>

## Research Context

There are a number of longitudinal studies that have followed siblings and families over early childhood and beyond.<sup>22,42-49</sup> Most studies of siblings in early childhood have employed naturalistic observations of siblings interacting at home, usually with their mothers, although a few studies have also included fathers.<sup>12,22,42,50</sup> Observational data is often complemented by sibling and parent interviews, questionnaires, hypothetical scenarios, structured tasks such as conflict negotiations, teaching tasks, or play sessions and measures of children's cognitive, emotional and social development.

## Key Research Questions

The basic question that has driven the research on sibling relations is why some dyads appear to get along so well and act as sources of emotional and instrumental support and companionship for one another, whereas other siblings have a much more troubled and conflictual relationship.<sup>2,4</sup> Following from this basic question, there are a number of key questions that have been raised:

1. How are the quality and nature of sibling relations associated with social-emotional outcomes, children's adjustment, children's later interactions in other relationships, and their understanding of their social worlds?
2. How should parents intervene in their children's conflicts? What are the connections between differential parental treatment (i.e., when one child is given preferential treatment) and sibling relationships?
3. What are the roles of age, birth order and gender in defining the nature and quality of sibling relations? How are individual differences in temperament associated with relationship quality?
4. How does the quality of earlier sibling relations affect sibling interactions over time?

## Recent Research Findings

Sibling relations provide an important context for the development of children's understanding of their social, emotional, moral and cognitive worlds.<sup>10,23</sup> In particular, siblings play an important role in the development of children's understanding of others' minds, namely their understanding of emotions, thoughts, intentions and beliefs.<sup>2,4</sup> Siblings seem to demonstrate an understanding of others' minds and emotions during real-life interactions long before they show this understanding on more formal assessments.<sup>4,6,33</sup> In particular, this understanding is revealed during episodes of teasing, pretend play, conflict resolution, teaching, and through

their use of emotional and mental language during conversations.<sup>2,4,33,51</sup> Young siblings who engage in frequent pretend play demonstrate a greater understanding of others' emotions and thinking, show evidence of creativity in their play themes and object use, and are more likely to construct shared meanings in play.<sup>10,52-55</sup> Individual differences in pretend play and conflict management strategies predict children's social understanding over time,<sup>33,43,56</sup> conflict resolution skills at age six,<sup>57</sup> and adjustment to first grade.<sup>58</sup>

One important area of research is related to sibling conflict and the best ways for parents to intervene when children disagree. Sibling conflicts are frequent,<sup>12,59</sup> poorly resolved,<sup>60,61</sup> and sometimes highly aggressive,<sup>25</sup> violent<sup>62</sup> or even abusive.<sup>63</sup> Sibling conflict in childhood is also associated with poorer adjustment both concurrently<sup>64</sup> and later in life. For instance, extreme levels of childhood sibling conflict are related to later violent tendencies as adults.<sup>65</sup> High levels of conflict may be particularly problematic when they are accompanied by an absence of sibling warmth.<sup>66</sup> Given these findings, it is not surprising that sibling conflict is a source of worry for parents<sup>67</sup> and that they are concerned about the best way to intervene. On the one hand, stepping in and resolving conflicts may deprive children of the opportunity to develop conflict resolution strategies of their own and may actually make conflicts worse.<sup>68-70</sup> On the other hand, intervention may sometimes help to make conflicts less intense and lead to more constructive resolutions.<sup>71,72</sup> Although most parents intervene by adjudicating,<sup>73</sup> some recent interventions have trained parents to mediate their children's sibling conflicts.<sup>74-77</sup> By structuring the negotiation process and yet leaving the final resolution in the hands of the children themselves, these interventions suggest a promising way to improve conflict outcomes while simultaneously helping children to understand one another and to develop more constructive resolution strategies.

When parents treat their children differently by directly varying amounts of positive affect, responsiveness, control, discipline and intrusiveness to the two children, sibling relations are likely to be more conflictual and less friendly,<sup>1,34,35,42</sup> but only if children view the differences as unfair.<sup>78-80</sup> More broadly speaking, sibling jealousy in the preschool years is linked to lower quality sibling relationships later in childhood.<sup>22</sup>

First-born siblings engage in leadership, teaching, caregiving, and helping roles, whereas second-born siblings are more likely to imitate, follow, be a learner, and elicit care and help.<sup>25,29,81-83</sup> Younger siblings often imitate the older child's language and actions during play, which is one way to establish shared meanings about the course of the play.<sup>25,84,85</sup> Siblings demonstrate the ability to teach one another during semi-structured tasks and also during ongoing interactions while playing together at home,<sup>31,32,83,86-91</sup> while taking into account the sibling's knowledge and understanding. During early childhood, siblings can act as sources of support during caretaking situations when the mother is absent for a short time<sup>8,92</sup> and in middle childhood siblings may provide support during stressful family experiences.<sup>49,93</sup> The natural power differences that result from the age difference between siblings mean that two children are likely to have different experiences in the family. For instance, second-born children have the benefit of learning from an older sibling, sometimes leading to precocious development for second-borns in some areas.<sup>94</sup>

Although older sisters are more likely to engage in caretaking and helping roles than older brothers,<sup>7,29</sup> there are few consistent gender or age gap differences in sibling relations in early childhood. As second-born siblings become more cognitively, linguistically and socially competent over the early years, they begin to take on more active roles in sibling interactions, for example by initiating more games.<sup>44</sup> As such, the early power imbalance that exists between siblings seems to become less relevant as siblings age, and interactions become more equitable.<sup>6,23,36</sup>

There is continuity in the quality of sibling relations during the early years and from early to middle childhood to early adolescence, particularly for older siblings' positive behaviour and feelings towards the younger.<sup>39,46,95,96</sup> However, large individual differences in the quality of sibling relations have been documented in many studies

cited here, which may also be influenced by other factors such as children's temperamental profiles.<sup>1,4,9</sup>

## Conclusions

The sibling relationship is a natural laboratory for young children to learn about their world.<sup>3</sup> It is a safe and secure place to learn how to interact with others who are interesting and engaging playmates, to learn how to manage disagreements, and to learn how to regulate both positive and negative emotions in socially acceptable ways.<sup>33</sup> There are many opportunities for young children to develop an understanding of social relations with family members who may be close and loving at times and nasty and aggressive at other times. Further, there are many opportunities for siblings to use their cognitive skills to convince others of their point of view, teach or imitate the actions of their sibling. The positive benefits of establishing warm and positive sibling relationships may last a lifetime, whereas more difficult early relationships may be associated with poor developmental outcomes. The task for young siblings is to find the balance between the positive and negative aspects of their interactions as both children develop over time.

## Implications for Policy and Service Perspectives

Sensitive parenting requires that adults employ developmentally appropriate strategies with children of different ages. Parental strategies for managing sibling conflicts, particularly the promotion of constructive (e.g., negotiated and fair resolutions) versus destructive (e.g., use of power and aggression) strategies, is vitally important for learning how to get along with others. The service and policy implications indicate that some parents may need help with these issues and there is a need for the development of parent education and sibling intervention programs.<sup>33,97</sup> Certainly we know from research that interventions to train parents to mediate sibling quarrels can be successful,<sup>74,75</sup> but reducing conflict has not generally been associated with an increase in prosocial sibling interactions.<sup>97</sup> Most programs have been aimed at assisting parents to develop better guidance strategies, but have not directly targeted siblings themselves. However, one promising social skills intervention program aimed at increasing prosocial interactions between young children was successful in improving sibling relationship quality and emotion regulation skills.<sup>97,98,99</sup> Clearly, however, the development of intervention programs aimed at improving sibling relationships is an area for future work from both a services and policy perspective.

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