

## PEER RELATIONS

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# Sibling Relations and Their Impact on Children's Development

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March 2023, 2e éd. rév.

### 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 and peer relationships, relatively little attention has been devoted to the role of siblings and their impact on one another's development. In recent decades, research on sibling relations in early childhood has shifted from examining the role of structural variables (e.g., age, birth order) towards more process variables (e.g., positive and negative exchanges). Siblings are viewed as an integral component of family systems<sup>1,2</sup> and as an important context for children's 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>1,2</sup> First, sibling relationships are emotionally charged, and defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality.<sup>1,2,4-6</sup> Second, sibling relations are often characterized by intimacy: as youngsters spend large amounts of time 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>5</sup> for engaging in pretend play,<sup>7-11</sup> humor,<sup>12-15</sup> for conflict,<sup>6,16-21</sup> and for understanding others' points of view and their thoughts and feelings.<sup>22-26</sup> Third, sibships are characterized by large individual differences in the quality of children's relations with one another.<sup>1,2,4,5</sup> Fourth, the age difference between siblings often makes issues of power and control<sup>27-32</sup> as well as rivalry and jealousy<sup>33-35</sup> sources of contention for children, but also provide a context for more positive types of complementary exchanges, such as teaching,<sup>36-40</sup> helping,<sup>1,2,5,40,41</sup> caregiving interactions,<sup>5,42,43</sup> and prosocial behaviour.<sup>41,44-46</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 from the siblings' perspective.<sup>6,47-49</sup>

## **Problems**

There are a number of methodological issues in the sibling literature. Birth order and age differences are confounded in many studies; thus, it is challenging to distinguish between role (i.e., birth order) and developmental differences.<sup>2,20</sup> Recruiting families with young children and collecting data at home can be time-consuming, yet provides rich naturalistic data. To date, research has focused on sibling dyads within middle-class, two-parent, predominantly White families in the US, Canada, and Western Europe. We therefore we know less about families with more than two children, single-parent families,<sup>3,50</sup> from different socioeconomic groups,<sup>3</sup> or families in varied cultures, although there have been some studies of Mayan<sup>46,51,52</sup> and Mexican-American families.<sup>53-55</sup> In more recent years, there are some studies investigating siblings in varied cultural contexts, such as Chinese,<sup>56-58</sup> Greek,<sup>59</sup> and Turkish, Dutch, and Indian families.<sup>60,61</sup>

## **Research Context**

There are a number of longitudinal studies that have followed siblings and families from the birth of a second child<sup>62</sup> and over early childhood and beyond.<sup>26,33,48,63-72</sup> While there is wide variation in how children respond to the birth of a younger sibling, most children are positive and eager to help care for the baby and exhibit little or no disruptive behaviour.<sup>62</sup> By early childhood siblings'

positive, friendly interactions often outweigh their negative interactions.<sup>73</sup> Most studies of siblings in early childhood have employed naturalistic observations of siblings interacting at home, usually with their mothers, although some studies have also included fathers.<sup>21,33,56,71,72,74,75</sup> Observational data is 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**

A 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>1,2,17,61,76</sup>

Following from this, a number of key questions 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?
3. What are the connections between differential parental treatment (i.e., when one child is given preferential treatment) and sibling relationships?
4. What are the roles of age, birth order and gender in defining the nature and quality of sibling relations?
5. 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>1,2,26,77</sup> In particular, siblings play a key role in the development of children's understanding of others' minds, namely their understanding of emotions, thoughts, intentions, and beliefs.<sup>1,2,24,77</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>1,42,78</sup> In particular, this understanding is revealed during episodes of imitation, teasing, shared humour, pretend play, conflict resolution, teaching, prosocial behaviour, and through their use of connected communications and emotional and

mental language during conversations.<sup>1,2,10-15,23,42,45,79-81</sup> Conflict can be an opportunity for siblings to learn constructive resolution skills culminating in a mutually agreeable (win-win) solution for both children, emotional regulation and understanding, and for considering the opponent's perspective.<sup>42</sup> Young siblings who engage in frequent pretend play demonstrate a greater understanding of others' emotions and thoughts, show evidence of creativity in their play themes and object use, and are more likely to construct shared meanings in play.<sup>7,9-11,82,83</sup> Individual differences in pretend play and conflict management strategies predict children's social understanding over time,<sup>14,23,42,63,84</sup> conflict resolution skills at age six,<sup>85</sup> and adjustment to first grade.<sup>86</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>21,87</sup> often poorly resolved,<sup>6,88,89</sup> and sometimes highly aggressive, violent, or even abusive.<sup>17,61,90</sup> When parents employ harsh, punitive discipline this is associated with greater sibling conflict and less friendly interaction even before the younger child is age 1.<sup>62,73</sup> Coercive and frequent sibling conflict and bullying in childhood are also associated with poorer adjustment both concurrently<sup>16,91</sup> and later in life.<sup>75,92</sup> High levels of conflict may be particularly problematic when they are accompanied by an absence of sibling warmth.<sup>61,76,93</sup> Given these findings, it is not surprising that sibling conflict is a source of worry for parents<sup>5</sup> and that they are concerned about the best way to intervene.<sup>33,94</sup> Although most parents intervene by adjudicating,<sup>95</sup> some interventions have trained parents to mediate their children's sibling conflicts.<sup>6,96-100</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>47,49,72,101</sup> but only if children view the differences as unfair.<sup>102-105</sup> More broadly speaking, sibling jealousy in the preschool years is linked to lower quality sibling relationships later in childhood.<sup>33,106</sup>

First-born siblings engage in leadership, teaching, caregiving, and helping roles, whereas second-born siblings are more likely to imitate, follow, take on the role of learner, and elicit care and help.<sup>2,6,38,40,45,90,107</sup> Younger siblings often imitate the older child's language and actions during play, which is one way to establish shared meanings.<sup>80,108</sup> Siblings demonstrate the ability to teach one another during semi-structured tasks and also during ongoing interactions while playing together at home,

<sup>38,39,55,109-112</sup> while taking into account their sibling's knowledge and understanding.<sup>36,43</sup> During early childhood, siblings can act as sources of support during caretaking situations when parents are absent for a short time<sup>5,43</sup> and in middle childhood siblings may provide support during stressful family experiences.<sup>43,66,113</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 certain areas.<sup>114</sup>

Older sisters are more likely to engage in caretaking and helping roles than older brothers,<sup>41,43</sup> whereas boys are reported to be more aggressive with siblings than girls according to parent reports.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, 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 or teaching their sibling.<sup>6,38,64</sup> As such, the early power imbalance that exists between siblings seems to become less prominent as siblings age, and interactions become more equitable.<sup>2,6,29,34,50,78</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>53,67,68,80,115,116</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>1,6,62</sup> number of siblings,<sup>69</sup> children's social understanding,<sup>2,24,69</sup> and parenting styles.<sup>62,73,101</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The sibling relationship is a natural laboratory for young children to learn about their world.<sup>2,3</sup> It provides opportunities 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>5,26,42</sup> In this way, it provides a venue for young children to develop an understanding of social relations with family members who may be close and loving at times and at other times, be unkind, exhibit jealousy, or act aggressively.<sup>33,75,92</sup> 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 problematic developmental outcomes.<sup>17,56,61,76</sup> The task for young siblings (with support from their parents) 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, prosocial behaviours) versus destructive (e.g., use of coercion and aggression) strategies, is vitally important for learning how to get along with others.<sup>6,94,98,117</sup> 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>6,42,94</sup> Certainly we know from research that interventions to train parents to mediate sibling quarrels can be successful,<sup>6,98,99</sup> but reducing conflict has not generally been associated with an increase in prosocial sibling interactions.<sup>76</sup> Various intervention programs have been developed.<sup>5,6,96,100,118</sup> Some 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>119-121</sup> This program has also resulted in improvements in parental emotional regulation.<sup>122</sup> Clearly, however, further development of intervention programs aimed at improving sibling relationships is an area for future work from both a services and policy perspective.<sup>6,96</sup>

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