



Sibling Relations and Their Impact on Children's Development

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Topic

Peer relations

Introduction

Approximately 80% of Western children 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. Over the past 25 years, 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,¹ but there are a number of methodological and conceptual challenges to studying siblings from this perspective.

Subject

In early childhood, three major characteristics of sibling relations are prominent.² First, sibling interactions are emotionally charged relationships defined by strong, uninhibited emotions of a positive, negative and sometimes ambivalent quality.^{2,3} 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,^{4,5} engaging in pretend play,^{6,7} for conflict,^{8,9} and for understanding others' points of view.¹⁰⁻¹³ Third, sibling relations are characterized by large individual differences in the quality of children's relations with one another.^{1,2} In addition, the age difference between siblings often makes the issues of power, control and rivalry a source of contention for children. These characteristics sometimes make sibling relations challenging for parents to deal with on a daily basis, because of the potentially emotional and highly charged nature of the relationship and the issue of differential parental treatment.

Problems

There are a number of methodological issues that plague the sibling literature. Birth order and age differences are confounded in many studies.¹⁴ 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, but we know little about families with more than two children, from different SES groups, or from non-Western families.

Research Context

There are a number of longitudinal studies that have followed siblings and families over early childhood.¹⁵⁻¹⁹ 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.^{8,20,21} Observational data is often complemented by sibling and parent interviews, questionnaires, structured tasks such as toy divisions or conflict negotiations, 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.² 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, 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.^{10,22} 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.² Siblings seem to demonstrate an understanding of others' minds during real-life interactions long before they show this understanding on more formal assessments.^{2,22} In particular, this understanding is revealed during episodes of teasing, pretend play, conflict resolution, and through their use of emotional and mental language during conversations.² Young siblings who engage in frequent pretend play demonstrate a greater understanding of others' emotions and are more likely to construct shared meanings in play.^{7,23} Individual

differences in pretend play and conflict management strategies predict children's social understanding over time,^{16,24} conflict resolution skills at age six,²⁵ and adjustment to first grade.²⁶

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,^{8,27} poorly resolved,^{28,29} and sometimes highly aggressive,¹⁴ violent³⁰ or even abusive.³¹ Sibling conflict in childhood is also associated with poorer adjustment later in life. For instance, childhood sibling conflict is related to later violent tendencies as adults.³² Given these findings, it is not surprising that sibling conflict is a source of worry for parents³³ 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.³⁴⁻³⁶ On the other hand, intervention may sometimes help to make conflicts less intense and lead to more constructive resolutions.³⁷ Although most parents intervene by adjudicating,³⁸ some recent interventions have trained parents to mediate their children's sibling conflicts.^{39,40} 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,^{1,21} but only if children view the differences as unfair.⁴¹

First-born siblings engage in leadership and teaching roles, whereas second-born siblings are more likely to imitate, follow and be a learner.^{14,42-44} During early childhood, siblings can act as sources of support during caretaking situations when the mother is absent for a short time^{5,45} and in middle childhood siblings may provide support during stressful family experiences.⁴⁶ 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, but first-borns do not, sometimes leading to precocious development for second-borns in some areas.⁴⁷

Although older sisters are more likely to engage in caretaking roles than older brothers,⁴ 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.¹⁶ As such, the early power imbalance that exists between siblings seems to become less relevant as siblings age, and interactions become more equitable.²²

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.^{18,48,49} 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 individual differences in temperament.¹

Conclusions

The sibling relationship is a natural laboratory for young children to learn about their world. It is a safe and secure place to learn how to interact with others who are interesting and engaging playmates, learn how to manage disagreements in constructive ways, and learn to regulate both positive and negative emotions in socially acceptable ways. 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 to use your cognitive skills to convince others of your point of view, teach or imitate the actions of your 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.⁵⁰ Certainly we know from recent research that interventions to train parents to mediate sibling quarrels can be successful,^{39,40} but reducing conflict has not generally been associated with an increase in prosocial sibling interactions.⁵⁰ Most programs have been aimed at assisting parents to develop better guidance strategies, but have not directly targeted siblings themselves. One recent social skills intervention program aimed at increasing prosocial interactions between young children was successful in both reducing conflict and increasing prosocial interactions between normally developing preschool and toddler-aged siblings.^{50,51} In conclusion, intervention programs aimed at problematic sibling relationships are in their infancy. Clearly, this is an area for future work from both a services and policy perspective.

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