

# Sibling Relationships and Development

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## Abstract

Although research on sibling relationships has been far less frequent than research on other close relationships such as parent–child, peer, and romantic partner relationships, researchers have found siblings to be important for the development of social competence as well as positive and negative adjustment. In addition, the sibling relationship is considered the longest lasting relationship across the life span and it serves unique developmental functions. This essay briefly describes foundational research on the influence of dyadic structural variables, relationship dynamics, and sibling influences on adjustment; outlines cutting-edge research within the field on the contexts of family ethnicity, developmental period, and important processes and influences on relationship dynamics; and discusses key issues for future research such as expanding to under-studied ethnic groups (e.g., Native American and Asian-American families), family structures and contexts (e.g., adoption, single-parents by choice, gay/lesbian parents), and mechanisms for relationship influence. Expanding the field to incorporate such research questions will likely require sibling researchers to examine findings from research on other important, close relationships, as well as collaboration of researchers from a variety of psychological disciplines as well as in the fields of sociology, neuroscience, genetics, anthropology, and human development and family studies.

## INTRODUCTION

Siblings have been considered the “forgotten relationship” (Kramer & Bank, 2005) as they are frequently overlooked in developmental research in comparison to parent–child and peer relationships (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). This trend seems in contrast, however, to the estimate that 80%–85% of children worldwide have a sibling. In addition, the sibling relationship is often considered the longest lasting close relationship of the life span (Conger & Kramer, 2010). Despite this comparative lack of examination, the findings of research on siblings have consistently shown the relationship to have important positive and negative influences on individual adjustment

(Brody, 2004). Also, given the unique blend of complementary (care-taking) and reciprocal (serving as confidant and playmate) behaviors inherent in the sibling relationship (Dunn, 2002), siblings are considered to serve unique developmental functions, while they are also important in shaping the family context given their location within the broader family system (Cox, 2010).

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

### STRUCTURAL VARIABLES

*Birth Order.* Early research in the field of sibling relationships focused on the influences of dyadic structural features. In terms of birth order, earlier-born siblings typically have more power in the relationship than later-born siblings, but they also typically perform more care-taking and instructional behaviors (particularly in childhood; Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). Later-born siblings are also typically more strongly attached to their earlier-born siblings than the reverse (Bank, 1992) and report greater interest and investment in the relationship than earlier-born siblings (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). The question of birth order influence, however, is consistently up for debate. Although earlier research often compared birth order between families, recent longitudinal research has been able to tease apart age and birth order effects on family dynamics by comparing reports within families, but at the same chronological age. So far, these methods have been utilized to investigate differences in parent–child conflict (Shanahan, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2007a), parent–child warmth (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007b), and family decision-making (Wray-Lake, Crouter, & McHale, 2010), although they could be used to investigate sibling relationship qualities as well.

*Age and Age Difference.* Aspects of age and age differences also have influenced the sibling relationship. Overall, research suggests that sibling relationships become more egalitarian and less affectively intense from childhood through adolescence (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990). Recent evidence suggests that this pattern may change again in emerging adulthood (Scharf, Shulman, & Avigad-Spitz, 2005; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2011). Research also suggests that conflict is greater among siblings who are closer in age than those further apart (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990), likely due to greater competition for similar resources (e.g., clothes, peers) given similar interests and social circles. When siblings are farther apart in age, older siblings often act as caretakers for younger siblings (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990), particularly in the case of older sisters (Stoneman, Brody, & MacKinnon, 1986).

*Sex Composition.* Overall, same-sex dyads tend to display greater warmth and involvement in their relationship than mixed-sex dyads, with sister-sister dyads displaying the highest levels of closeness and positivity (Buhrmester & Furman, 1990), as well as intimate disclosure (Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Rinaldi, & Lehoux, 2000). Mixed-sex sibling dyads appear to offer greater opportunities for sex-typing by parents (e.g., older sisters with younger brothers tend to do more chores than younger sisters with older brothers; McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). Sex composition of the dyad is also important for siblings during parental marital transitions, such that older sisters are more likely to be supportive/compensatory toward younger siblings (particularly sisters) in the face of divorce and remarriage (see McGuire & Shanahan, 2010). Although patterns of warmth, closeness, and support based on sex-composition of the dyad appear to be rather consistent in the literature, the ways in which relationship processes may differ based on gender of the individual or composition of the dyad have been inconsistent or inconsistently examined.

#### RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

*Social Learning and Deidentification.* Social learning is most likely to occur when someone has similar characteristics (e.g., same-sex siblings), is nurturing, and is viewed as powerful (e.g., greater age status and more experienced). For example, extant research using social learning perspectives, supports similarities in involvement in risky behaviors in adolescence (McHale, Bissell, & Kim, 2009) and the use of relational and physical aggression in childhood (Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher, 2006). With few exceptions, the focus has been on older siblings serving as role models for their younger siblings. Recently, researchers have emphasized the importance of investigating how younger siblings may influence their older siblings by taking a “bottom-up approach” (Whiteman, Becerra, & Killoren, 2009), particularly in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

Research has also focused on sibling differences and why and under what conditions siblings de-identify from one another. De-identification is the process by which siblings try to differ from one another (Whiteman *et al.*, 2009). In contrast to earlier assumptions about deidentification processes, quantitative data show that both older and younger siblings have been shown to de-identify from one another (Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008).

*Parental Differential Treatment.* Turning to parental differential treatment (PDT), less favored siblings have reported more externalizing behaviors over time (Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks, 2005). In addition, differential warmth

by mothers has been linked more strongly to firstborn's reports of sibling conflict; whereas, differential warmth by fathers has been linked more strongly to second-born's reports of sibling conflict (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008). In a study of PDT in young adulthood, more maternal differential treatment was associated with less intimacy between siblings, but more paternal differential treatment was related to less sibling intimacy only for the less-favored sibling and not for the favored sibling (Jensen, Whiteman, Fingerman, & Birditt, 2013). In addition, familism values play a protective role such that when youth report high levels of familism values, there are fewer significant correlations between domains of differential treatment (e.g., privileges, warmth) and youth well-being (McHale, Updegraff, Shanahan, Crouter, & Killoren, 2005). Findings highlight the importance of including sibling characteristics, parent gender, and cultural values when investigating the effects of PDT on sibling relationships adjustment.

#### INFLUENCES ON ADJUSTMENT/DEVELOPMENT

*Positive.* Sibling relationships can be positive for children's development and overall adjustment. Older siblings show increasing abilities to teach younger siblings and simplify tasks. Doing so also results in increases in older siblings' own perspective taking, as well as higher reading and language achievement scores. Alternatively, younger siblings who are nurtured by their older siblings develop greater sensitivity to others' feelings and perspectives. Also, when sibling relationships are characterized as both supportive and as having some conflict, siblings are able to test their perspective-taking skills through conflict resolution. This has been associated with greater social skill in younger siblings' peer relationships as well (see Brody, 2004 for review).

*Negative.* Despite the positive outcomes sibling relationships can provide, negative consequences of siblings have been more emphasized in the literature. Younger siblings of older siblings with aggressive, antisocial, and/or externalizing problems have been found to be at greater risk for developing similar problems than children without problematic older siblings (e.g., Brody, Kim, Murry, & Brown, 2003). In addition, younger sisters of older sisters who are involved in early or risky sexual behavior and/or teen pregnancy are at greater risk for being involved in these same behaviors (e.g., East & Jacobson, 2001). Negative consequences also exist from the quality of the sibling relationship itself. Greater conflict and negativity between siblings is associated with greater depression, anxiety, and externalizing behaviors

(e.g., Criss & Shaw, 2005; Stocker, Burwell, & Briggs, 2002). However, a recent longitudinal study by Solmeyer, McHale, and Crouter (2013) found that the association between sibling conflict and externalizing behavior was only evident among sisters and mixed-sex dyads. Conflict among brothers was not associated with later risky behavior. Importantly, these associations have been found to be the case over and above the effects of the marital and/or parent–child relationships. Thus, these influences are not merely due to family environment, they are specific to the sibling relationship.

## CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

### ETHNICITY

*African-American and Latino Families.* Although the vast majority of sibling research has focused on European-American families, recent research has been extended to African-American and Latino families. In African-American families, positive sibling relationships are related to healthy well-being and strong ethnic identity, whereas negative sibling relationships are linked to adjustment problems. In another study, positive sibling relationships coupled with high familism values resulted in positive adjustment for firstborns (but not second-borns; Soli, McHale, & Feinberg, 2009). Further, sibling relationships characterized by high relational aggression and low familism values have been associated with poor adjustment for second-born siblings (but not for firstborns). In two-parent Mexican-American families, researchers have found that siblings report warmth and negativity in their relationships and high involvement with one another (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005). As reviewed above, parents' differential treatment of siblings in Mexican-American families also has been examined (McHale *et al.*, 2005). These findings illuminate the importance of including culture and sibling characteristics in studies of sibling relationships and youth adjustment.

### PROCESSES/INFLUENCES

*Positive Adjustment.* More recent research has also begun to emphasize the positive qualities and roles of sibling relationships, as opposed to negative consequences. For instance, Kim, McHale, Crouter, and Osgood (2007) found that increases in sibling intimacy during middle childhood and adolescence were longitudinally associated with greater peer competence for all siblings, and lower levels of depression for girls. Also, siblings who reported greater warmth and lower conflict (than average) in their relationship also reported greater empathy (than average) and the association between sibling warmth

and empathy increased over time (Lam, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012). Continuing to emphasize positive aspects of the sibling relationship is important to the further development and effectiveness of family therapy, preventions, and interventions aimed at improving the quality of sibling relationships.

*Domains of Sibling Conflict.* Although it is important to expand our understanding of positive features within sibling relationships, research on sibling conflict continues to flourish, likely due to the ubiquity of it across sibling relationships. Recent research on sibling conflict has been particularly interested in the content of siblings' conflicts. Campione-Barr and Smetana (2010) identified two content domains of conflict during adolescence: equality and fairness (e.g., whose turn it is to do chores), and invasion of the personal domain (e.g., entering other's room without asking). Invasion of the personal domain issues were found to be more frequent and more intense than issues of equality and fairness and only the former had negative associations with relationship quality. Also, equality and fairness conflicts were associated with later depressive symptoms, while invasion of the personal domain conflicts conferred greater risk for anxiety and lower self-esteem (Campione-Barr, Greer & Kruse, 2013). With younger children, Recchia and Howe (2010) observed that most conflicts were regarding moral issues such as fairness/rights, psychological harm, or physical harm. Interestingly, compromise appears most likely in physical harm disagreements with younger children (Recchia & Howe, 2010), but when adolescent siblings discuss issues of harm, destructive conflict is more likely utilized (Campione-Barr, Bassett Greer, Schwab, & Kruse, 2014). Taken together, these findings suggest that what siblings fight about is important for functioning and adjustment.

*Disclosure/Communication.* The sibling processes of disclosure and communication have received more attention as of late, although they likely require further examination. In a study of early adolescent siblings, researchers found that youth were more likely to disclose to siblings than to parents and friends, and particularly when they had warm relationships with siblings (Howe *et al.*, 2000). In childhood, sibling disclosure was related to greater warmth, rivalry and conflict with siblings (Martinez & Howe, 2013). Observational studies also have shown that successful conversation (i.e., smoothness of communication) between 4-year-old children and their siblings is linked to advanced socio-cognitive abilities and sibling relationship positivity (Cutting & Dunn, 2006). In adolescence, greater frequency of sibling conversations about sex plays a supplemental role to parent-child conversations about sex in predicting less risky attitudes and



greater condom-use self-efficacy when compared to less frequent conversations (Kowal & Blinn-Pike, 2004). In an observational study focused on adolescent girls and their older sisters, researchers found that sisters serve as confidants, sources of support, and mentors during conversations about dating and sexuality (Killoren & Roach, 2014).

#### DEVELOPMENTAL TRANSITIONS

*Emerging Adulthood.* Until recently, research clarifying how sibling relationships transform from adolescence to adulthood has been very rare. Given that developmental changes in emerging adulthood (generally considered ages 18–25) often include moving out of the natal home (for college, work, military, etc.), this period is often the first time in which siblings are living apart and, thus, the relationship becomes more voluntary. Scharf *et al.* (2005) found that like during adolescence, conflict during emerging adulthood continues to decline, but in contrast to adolescence, warmth in the relationship begins to increase. Whiteman *et al.* (2011) also found an increase in intimacy between siblings during the first year older siblings were in college, but this was only the case if older siblings moved out of the home they shared with their siblings and parents. New findings also suggest that greater conflict in adolescence, can actually lead to better quality relationships when the older sibling leaves home for college, and that certain types of conflicts (i.e., equality and fairness issues) may be particularly helpful in transforming the power differential between siblings (Lindell, Campione-Barr, & Greer, 2013). More research is needed in this area to help clarify the ways in which siblings transform their relationship from adolescence to potentially lifelong supportive relationships throughout adulthood.

#### ASSOCIATIONS WITH OTHER CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

*Within the Family System.* Sibling relationships do not exist in isolation. In a novel study of multiple sibling dyads (with children ranging from early childhood to middle adolescence) within one family, researchers found greater similarity between affection and hostility among sibling dyads within the same family compared to sibling dyads from different families, showing that the family climate influences sibling relationship quality (Jenkins, Rasbash, Leckie, Gass, & Dunn, 2012). In a longitudinal study of bidirectional effects between parental support and sibling warmth throughout adolescence, authors found that spillover in support from the sibling relationship to the parent–child relationship (but not from the parent–child to sibling relationship) in early adolescence only (Derkman, Engels, Kuntsche, van der Vorst, & Scholte, 2011). In addition, throughout

adolescence, maternal acceptance increased as sibling intimacy increased; whereas, paternal conflict increased as sibling conflict increased (Kim, McHale, Osgood, & Crouter, 2006). Regarding links to the marital relationship, incongruence in parental differential conflict with siblings was linked to lower marital satisfaction and higher marital conflict (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008).

*Associations with Peers/Friends.* Sibling relationships also are linked to friendships. In an observational study of young children's relationships with a friend and an older sibling, researchers found greater asymmetry in children's relationships with their older siblings compared to their friends (McElwain & Volling, 2005). Importantly, they also found that positive relationship quality with one partner (either friend or sibling) was an important buffer of poor adjustment when children had a negative relationship with the other partner. In young adulthood, having a harmonious relationship with a friend compensated for a poor relationship with a sibling, however, having a harmonious relationship with a sibling did not compensate for a poor relationship with a friend (Sherman, Lansford, & Volling, 2006).

*Associations with Romantic Partners.* Research linking sibling and romantic relationships is sparse. Researchers have shown that late adolescents' positive and negative conflict resolution behaviors with siblings predicted conflict resolution strategies with romantic partners (Reese-Weber & Kahn, 2005; Shalash, Wood, & Parker, 2013). Further, sibling conflict has been linked to romantic relationship intimacy, for girls, but not for boys (Doughty, McHale, & Feinberg, 2013). In addition, PDT of siblings was linked to sibling jealousy, which in turn, was linked to adolescents' romantic relationships (e.g., conflict, ambivalence, jealousy; Rauer & Volling, 2007). Sex composition has important implications for adolescents' romantic relationships. Specifically, older siblings in mixed-gender dyads (compared to same-gender dyads) reported greater romantic relationship intimacy (Doughty *et al.*, 2013).

## KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Research on sibling relationships over the past two decades has moved the field from being predominantly concerned with similarities and differences in siblings and the influence of dyad constellation variables to examining important processes and mechanisms in the sibling relationship and influences on positive and negative adjustment. There are several aspects of the sibling relationship, however, that researchers in the field have paid little attention to or know little about. While structural variable such as birth order,



age difference, and gender composition have been frequently examined, other family structures or contexts have received little attention. First, most research has focused on a single sibling dyad within each family, regardless of the number of children in the family. The logistics of examining more than one sibling dyad within the same family has been a daunting task for most researchers, but newer statistical techniques (e.g., multilevel modeling; social network analysis) give us greater opportunities to examine multiple, interconnected relationships. Second, previous research has typically focused on two-heterosexual-parent families with biologically related children. Family contexts, and thus sibling relationships, have become much more diverse in recent decades, yet research on these contexts has been scarce. For example, beyond behavior genetics studies, little research has examined the sibling relationship within the context of adoptive families. Similarly, little is known about sibling relationships in families formed through assisted reproduction methods, which may create anywhere from fully biologically to nonbiologically related siblings. In addition, both adoptive and nontraditional conception methods may be utilized in the contexts of two-heterosexual-parent families, intentional single-parent families, or gay- or lesbian-parent families; the latter two family structures have received very little attention in the context of family relationships in general, and sibling relationships in particular, to date as well (see McGuire & Shanahan, 2010).

Although more recent research has begun to examine sibling relationships within ethnic groups besides European-American families, research is still sparse, if at all present, on some groups. Research on sibling relationships within Native American families could be enlightening in examining the effects of discrimination and culture in a nonimmigrant ethnic minority group. In addition, research within the context of Asian-American families has been extremely rare. Given that Asian-American families are less likely to live in poverty and have higher median income levels than all other ethnic minority groups within the United States (Le, 2013), research on these sibling relationships could be helpful in examining the effects of discrimination and culture without the added confound of lower socioeconomic status as has often been the case in research on other ethnic minority groups (see McGuire & Shanahan, 2010).

Finally, recent research has begun to examine the processes and mechanisms by which the sibling relationship influences development (e.g., modeling, communication, conflict resolution), but this work is still relatively new to the field. Research within other close relationships, such as parent-child, peer, and romantic relationships, has examined a broader variety of processes by which these relationships influence development and adjustment. Future research on siblings should aim to investigate the role of mechanisms found within other relationships, as well as compare the ways by which those

processes and their magnitude of influence change over the life-course (see Cox, 2010). Research of this nature also serves to inform sibling-focused prevention and intervention programs (see Kennedy & Kramer, 2008; Feinberg, Sakuma, Hostetler, & McHale, 2013 for examples).

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