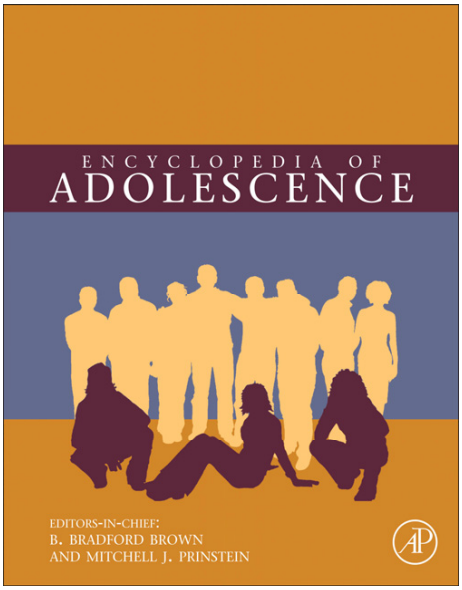

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Adolescent Sibling Relations

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Glossary

Agonism or antagonistic behaviors: Behaviors directed toward siblings that are experienced as unpleasant or conflictual (e.g., fighting, teasing, taunting).
Ambivalence: Mixtures or rapid fluctuations of positive and negative interpersonal behaviors and emotions (e.g., feeling both fondness and resentment for a sibling, or shifting between friendly and antagonistic behaviors).
Biological (genetic) relatedness: Percentage of shared genes between siblings in the same family. Monozygotic (MZ) or identical twins are conceived from one egg and share 100% of their genes; dizygotic (DZ) or fraternal twins are conceived from two eggs and share ~50% of their genes; full siblings share 50% of their genes on average but are born at different times; adoptive siblings share 0% genetic material with other siblings in the family.
Deidentification: Each sibling in the family carves out their own unique identity largely in reaction to how they view their siblings' identity. For example, individuals may try to differentiate themselves by selecting characteristics, interests, or activities that are distinct from their siblings.
Differential parental treatment: Behaviors of parents toward individual offspring that are perceived by one or more individuals in the family to indicate a preference for one child over another.
Intervention: Programs designed to improve current behavior problems and to reduce risk factors that may contribute to future patterns of problem behaviors. Universal, preventive intervention programs focus on all individuals (such as all students in a school), secondary or targeted intervention programs focus on an identified at-risk group, and treatment intervention programs focus on those individuals and families with specific problems.
Nonshared environment: Experiences and events not shared with siblings, which may promote individual differences.
Prosocial behaviors: Positive behaviors directed toward siblings, which are experienced as involved, warm, or caring behaviors (e.g., helping, sharing, affection).
Shared environment: Experiences and events shared with siblings, which may promote similarities among individual siblings.

Introduction

"It was the best of times; it was the worst of times." Dickens wrote this opening line of *A Tale of Two Cities* in 1859 to describe a period of history, but he could just as well have been describing the state of sibling relationships during adolescence. Adolescence is often viewed as an individual journey through the developmental changes associated with the second decade of life. However, the vast majority of individuals – over 80% – have one or more siblings who accompany them on this journey. And with the exception of twins, siblings move through the changes of adolescence at different points in time. As each individual experiences the biological, social, emotional, and physical changes associated with pubertal maturation, relationships with siblings, as well as with parents, can change. Siblings who are on good terms can provide support, advice, encouragement, and serve as empathetic confidants; siblings who have volatile or hostile relationships may move even farther apart as they experience the new freedoms of adolescence and seek to differentiate themselves from one another.

Changes in the family, such as marital conflict, divorce, and economic distress due to job loss or illness, may put additional strain on parent–child and on sibling relationships. These negative life events may serve either as a wedge to drive siblings apart or as a catalyst to bring them together. Parents are also challenged by how, when, and if they should intervene when siblings have troubled or nonexistent relationships, particularly as siblings move through the adolescent years.

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Simply put, adolescence is an interesting and often challenging time to be a sibling, and this article reviews current thinking and research on these lifelong relationships and highlights exciting avenues for exploration in the future. In this article, we consider sibling relationships in adolescence as enduring relationships that play a significant role in determining who we are. We review theoretical perspectives related to how siblings get along and summarize research findings that have informed the development of prevention and intervention strategies aimed at helping adolescents establish supportive relationships with their siblings.

Enduring Relationships that Play a Significant Role in Determining Who We Are

Although there is a relatively long history of research on sibling relationships, actually very few studies directly examine how we can best help siblings develop strong relationships in adolescence. The majority of research on siblings has focused on understanding the role that factors such as birth order, age spacing, gender constellation, and family size have on individuals. In addition to the fact that many inconsistencies have been noted in this body of research (e.g., you can find one set of studies that show that siblings close in age get along better, and another set that shows just the opposite), very little attention has been paid to what exactly makes these relationships successful. That is, how do sibling relationships in adolescence really operate? What factors predict which relationships are likely to be more positive? As researcher Judy Dunn has shown in her longitudinal research, factors such as birth order or age span explain very little of the variation in sibling relationship quality, at least in early and middle childhood. With adolescents, gender does appear to play an important role, for example, as sisters tend to provide more support to their younger siblings than do elder brothers. But, as this article illustrates, there is so much more than demographic or 'social address' factors to consider.

The behaviors that siblings exchange over time are much better predictors of sibling relationship quality than the social address variables of age, birth order, and gender. For example, consider conflict between adolescent siblings: a conflict may be quickly resolved if siblings have a history of being able to talk openly, have some shared interests, and have worked together in the past to solve problems or accomplish goals. Siblings who are distant, disengaged, or have a history of unresolved resentments will be less likely to manage conflicts as they arise. This is likely to be the case regardless of siblings' ages and gender.

To develop a more comprehensive understanding of siblings and the nature of their relationship, we need to consider three fundamental factors:

1. the quality of the relationship that siblings establish with one another;
2. the family context in which siblings develop their relationships; and
3. the broader social context that exists outside of the family, in which adolescents also operate.

First, the quality of the relationship that siblings establish with one another is important, because there tends to be consistency in the type of relationship siblings develop over time. That is, siblings who begin their relationship on a positive note are likely to continue to behave in positive ways toward one another as they mature. It is also the case that siblings who begin their relationship with more negative behaviors, for example, with more antagonism, conflict, and other forms of negative behaviors, are also likely to continue interacting with one another in these ways, unless there is some form of intervention that acts to improve the relationship. This suggests that understanding the nature of the sibling relationship early in development will yield some important clues about how siblings will likely relate to one another in adolescence. This leaves us with some critical questions about how we can best encourage young siblings to behave in a prosocial manner so that they can continue to support one another when they encounter stressful situations in adolescence.

Second, understanding sibling relationships in relation to other family relationships, such as parent–child and marital relationships, is essential because siblings may have more difficulty getting along when their relationships with parents are poor (e.g., unsupportive or conflictual), or when parents are having marital problems, or are separated or divorced. Family stress can also have a significant impact on the sibling relationship – levels of sibling support may be higher in families who are facing a critical life event, such as the chronic illness of a family member or an economic hardship, such as a parent's loss of employment. Adolescents are also sensitive about how they and their siblings are individually treated by parents and the perception that one is treated more favorably is linked with poor sibling (and parent–child) relationships. Thus, knowledge of the family context can significantly expand our understanding of sibling relationships.

And finally, we must appreciate the sibling relationship with respect to the outside world – for example, with respect to adolescents' relationships with peers, friends, romantic partners, and other adults, as well as with respect to cultural, ethnic, socioeconomic, and global contexts. Adolescents, by and large, are social creatures who progressively spend more of their time and devote greater interests to their relationships with others outside of the family. Relationships with peers, friends, and romantic partners consume their attention, which often leaves less time and interest in activities with siblings. Similarly, more intensive engagement with the world of school, extracurricular activities, and perhaps part-time employment, often reduce the potential time for interactions with siblings. Therefore, it is important to address the ways in which siblings may maintain a degree of closeness with their siblings, or instead, go in separate ways.

The social and cultural worlds in which siblings operate also merit attention. Cultural and ethnic groups may vary in their value of sibling relationships, with some cultures offering very clear and prescribed or required roles for sisters and brothers that may serve to more strongly cement their relationship. For example, in traditional eastern Indian families, sisters and brothers are expected to form a strong bond that lasts throughout the life course. As adults, brothers may be expected to place the well-being of their sisters above that of their wives and children. In contrast, other cultures may prescribe few expectations for sibling relationships, and as a result,

the strength of the sibling bond may be less robust. In general, the research of Patricia Zukow and others suggests that cultures that encourage children to help care for or look after their brothers and sisters in early childhood may foster a closeness among siblings that continues into adolescence and adulthood.

The Developmental Course of Sibling Relationships

Sibling relationships begin with the arrival of the second child in a family and continue throughout life. Although most children become siblings through the birth of a second child, siblings also are acquired through adoption and remarriage. Other individuals may also serve in the sibling role, such as children in long-term foster care, close relatives or, in some cases, nonrelatives or fictive kin (e.g., individuals who are referred to as sisters or brothers because they are frequently engaged with the family but actually bear no biological or legal relationship). Exactly how young children establish relationships with siblings of each of these types, and what factors predict how well children will get along with a sibling, are fascinating questions that many theorists and researchers have been trying to answer for decades.

The early decades of sibling research focused on firstborn children's adjustment to the arrival of a new baby and the appearance of sibling rivalry. Our initial understanding of sibling relationships was dominated by a psychodynamic orientation, held by clinicians, such as Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, and David Levy, that emphasized the emotional upset that a young child experienced when a new child entered the family. Freud described this event as a traumatic displacement or dethronement as a new child captured their parents' (usually their mother's) time and attention, and the elder child suddenly felt left out and unappreciated. Furthermore, this orientation emphasized young children's hostility, often expressed toward both mothers and the new babies, in an attempt to understand the disrupted attachment between mothers and firstborn children after the arrival of a second child. Not surprisingly, these clinicians portrayed the relationship between young siblings as one marked by hostility, resentment, and rivalry. Furthermore, sibling rivalry was considered to be universal – all siblings were expected to experience it. In fact, David Levy claimed that even siblings who appeared to get along well also experienced rivalry – they were simply using defense mechanisms (such as reaction formation in which they demonstrate a behavior opposite to what they truly feel as a way to protect themselves from the anxiety that comes from disliking a family member) to avoid seeming as if they resented their sibling. Clearly, hypotheses such as this are difficult to prove or disprove. More recently, better research has been conducted that demonstrates that sibling relationships are not always negative and rivalrous, and that, in fact, we can help children to develop positive relationships even when there are early signs of resentment and hostility.

Beginning in the 1980 s, research by Judy Dunn and Carol Kendrick helped explain why some young siblings develop warm and supportive (prosocial) relationships, while others develop relationships that are more hostile and conflict-laden (antagonistic). One important factor was the quality of relationships that the young children experienced with their mothers before their sibling arrived. Firstborn children whose mothers talked to them about the new baby as a new, important member of the family whom they would love and who would love them, and who, as a unique individual, would have his or her own thoughts, feelings, needs, and interests, were more likely to establish a positive relationship with their new sibling than firstborn children who did not have communications like these with their mothers. Furthermore, Dunn and Kendrick also demonstrated that most sibling relationships could be described as ambivalent relationships, containing both positive and negative attitudes, and prosocial and antagonistic types of behaviors. This ambivalence could be experienced by children as mixtures or rapid fluctuations of positive and negative interpersonal behaviors and emotions (e.g., feeling both fondness and resentment for a sibling, or shifting between friendly and antagonistic behaviors). Dunn and Kendrick also showed that the overall quality of children's sibling relationships tended to be rather stable over time, so that many of the characteristics of the sibling relationship in early childhood were carried on into adolescence.

Laurie Kramer extended this line of research to show that children's relationships with other important members of their social worlds – their best friends – were also important predictors of how well firstborn children would get along with their siblings. Preschool-aged children who had enjoyable relationships with their best friends, which included coordinated play and conversation, fantasy play, the establishment of a nonnegative emotional climate, and the ability to manage conflicts, tended to have more positive relationships with their sibling when that new child was 6- and 14 months of age. More recently, Kramer found that the quality of these friendship relationships continued to predict the quality of children's sibling relationships throughout adolescence. These results suggest that the social competencies that young children learn and exercise with their friends – even before they become siblings – play an important role in helping children establish and maintain a positive relationship with siblings throughout childhood and adolescence.

Getting to Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental stage that typically covers the second decade of life, 10–20 years of age. A great deal of research has focused on understanding individual development, such as cognitive and social emotional development, during this life stage. Only recently has research focused on sibling relationships during the teen or adolescent years. Katherine Conger and colleagues used videotaped interactions and questionnaires from over 500 adolescent sibling dyads to increase our understanding of the nature of sibling relationship quality during adolescence. Consistent with Kramer's research on sibling and friend relationships, Conger found evidence that sibling relationships are not fully determined during childhood, but continue to change throughout adolescence. Researchers suggest that there are multiple factors that affect sibling relationships during these formative years. For example, social support has been identified as one important function of these lifelong relationships. Research on adolescents and college-age youth indicates that social

support from a sibling may be crucial for helping teens successfully negotiate the unique opportunities and challenges of adolescence.

Variations in Sibling Relationship Quality

Siblings are our companions, for better or worse, throughout life; siblings can inspire us to do our best, and sometimes our worst, in many areas of life. They can be friend or foe, companion and competitor, with each being as different as night and day. We are just beginning to understand the kinds of impact siblings have on one another's lives over time.

Early studies on personality, and some current popular psychology, suggested that knowing the birth order, age spacing, and gender composition of the siblings in a family can tell you a lot about a person. Questions about these social address factors were easy to ask on surveys, and researchers then correlated a person's sibling status with other answers about their personality, success at school and work, and family relationships. Birth order refers to whether a person is first born, second born, or the baby of the family. Hundreds of studies have linked a person's birth order, and sometimes the number of siblings, to educational achievement, occupational success, happy marriages, and many other indicators of individual adjustment. However, results from these studies have been inconsistent and inconclusive on whether birth order plays a major role in individual development and life outcomes. Frank Sulloway provides one of the more comprehensive treatments of birth order and suggests that it is useful as a predictor of family dynamics and creativity. Using historical data to examine the longstanding scientific conversation regarding the role of nature and nurture in individual development, he contends that firstborn offspring are more likely to be more compliant with parents' wishes and that second-borns (or later-born children) are more likely to move in creative or new directions away from their parents and their elder sibling. Sulloway uses these findings to explain why firstborn children are often viewed as more oriented toward academic achievement while secondborn children tend to be more creative and socially oriented.

Taking gender into account, the proponents of birth order theory contend that many aspects of one's life could be predicted by whether or not the individual was a firstborn girl with brothers or a secondborn boy stuck between an elder brother and a younger sister who, according to siblings, got everything she wanted. Again, results from these studies have not provided consistent answers about the life course of individuals and have rarely focused on other factors that may contribute to the nature and quality of the relationship between siblings. As discussed subsequently, there are many other factors, in addition to social address factors, that need to be taken into account to fully understand what makes for both the well-being of siblings as individuals and successful sibling relationships.

In the next section, we briefly review some of the factors that contribute to similarities and differences among individual siblings. We highlight the processes of differential parental treatment, and the impact of shared and nonshared environments, as key factors that help us understand how the various experiences that siblings have contribute both to their development as individuals and to the quality of the relationship they establish with one another.

But My Sister Is Nothing Like Me: Why Are Siblings so Different?

Many individuals wonder why siblings are so different, especially because they typically grow up in the same family. This issue is part of the ongoing debate among researchers about the influences of nature (an individual's genetic makeup) and nurture (interactions with parents and other family members, and experiences outside the family). The more we know about genes and environments and how they interact, the more we understand why there are no easy answers to this interesting question.

The following illustration describes how genes and environments contribute to similarities and differences between siblings. People understand why monozygotic twins (commonly called identical twins) are similar because they share 100% of their genetic material on average. Thus, when people observe differences between monozygotic twins, they often attribute these differences to environmental factors such as each twin's unique experiences with parents or friends. We need to keep in mind, however, that the environment of identical twins is also likely to be more similar because they are the same sex and arrive at the same time in the family. Therefore, both genetic and social or environmental factors are operating to make monozygotic twins more similar. In comparison, dyzygotic twins (also known as fraternal twins) also arrive in families at the same time but they share only 50% of their genes and they may be the same or opposite sex. So for fraternal twins, especially opposite sex twins, some factors push them to be different, while others, such as age, promote similarity. Nontwin siblings who are biologically related (the most common variety), also share approximately 50% of their genetic material, but each individual has a unique birth date and arrives at a different point in their family's life. For these sisters and brothers, most of the factors including gender (those dyads of opposite sex), are promoting differences. Even though they live in the same family, one adolescent's experience may be quite different from those of a sister or brother, in part because their family environments are a little different. For example, a firstborn child spends part of his or her childhood living only with parents, while younger siblings enter a household that already contains other children (as well as more experienced parents). And, throughout the course of development, each child in the family may be treated somewhat differently by parents – for both good and not so good reasons. In addition, each sibling is likely to have their own set of relationships with people outside of the family (e.g., friends, teachers, coaches), which may also shape them as individuals in different ways. Thus, there are many factors that lead individual siblings on similar and different life paths.

Differential Parental Treatment

As mentioned previously, differential parental treatment may be a key factor that helps to explain why individual siblings in the same family might be so different from one another.

Differential parental treatment refers to the ways in which a parent may treat one child differently from another. Differential or preferential treatment may be perceived across many domains of behavior (e.g., a teen may feel that a sibling is favored by parents in virtually all aspects of family life) or only in some selected domains (e.g., a teen may feel that she receives more attention and affection from parents than her brother, but that they are treated in a similar fashion in most other things).

Most parents and children agree that parents need to treat individual children equitably and not consistently favor one child over another. It is important to note that equitable or fair treatment may not always be equal treatment. For example, setting a 7:30 p.m. bedtime for all children in the family may be equal, but it is not likely to be viewed as fair by the 16-year-old eldest sibling. Rather, equitable parental treatment respects the developmental and personal needs of each child in the family.

Most children are vigilant about whether or not parental treatment is equitable. Kowal and Kramer conducted interviews with adolescents and learned that teens consider many factors, such as individual sibling's ages, personal qualities, experiences, needs, and interests as they judge whether or not parental differential treatment is acceptable and fair. For example, one brother reported that he and his dad liked the same sports and so he spent more time with dad than his sibling; both siblings viewed this as fair. In another family, a sister reported that it was fair that her mother paid more attention to her brother because he was having difficulty making friends and needed more support from their mother than she did. In these same conversations, however, adolescents were sensitive about their younger siblings earning privileges or being permitted to do things at a much earlier age than they were; they reported vivid memories of how they were treated by parents when they were their younger sibling's age and often considered their parents' current leniency to be unfair. Interestingly, Susan McHale and her colleagues have shown that children who have a sibling with a special need (e.g., a developmental or physical challenge) tend to view even large degrees of parental differential treatment to be fair, because they understand that their sibling needs specialized care and attention from parents.

Anyone who has a brother or sister can most likely recall multiple instances where they thought their mom or dad was favoring the other child, and many wonder if there are lasting effects of preferential treatment. Research has shown that differential parental treatment during adolescence is indeed related to poorer sibling relationships, poorer parent–child relationships, and poorer individual well-being, but only when adolescents judge the differential treatment to be unfair. Differential treatment that is viewed as appropriate or as occurring in the service of meeting the unique needs of individual children is not linked with later difficulties. However, unresolved resentments, especially those related to parental differential treatment that is believed to be unfair, can be a source of conflict between siblings throughout life. Whereas some adults actively work to resolve these lingering problems (e.g., by turning to therapy), others may never resolve old grudges and thereby lose a potential source of support in later years.

Differential Experiences with Peers and Adults

Experiences with peers are increasingly common as adolescents move into the larger social world of middle school and high school. Individual siblings who have different sets of friends have multiple opportunities to have experiences that are unique (nonshared) and thereby contribute to differences observed between siblings in the same family. Siblings also may have vastly different experiences if one sibling has peers with more conventional values such as doing well in school, planning for college, and taking advantage of extracurricular activities related to academic and personal achievement. These activities and experiences are quite different from a sibling who ends up associating with peers who have more deviant values and encourage activities such as skipping school, experimenting with tobacco, alcohol, and sex, and engaging in delinquent or illegal activities. Research on sibling and peer influences provides evidence that both can serve in either a protective function (e.g., by serving as models of positive or adaptive behaviors) or a risk function (e.g., by serving as models of deviant or maladaptive behaviors). Interestingly, having a close relationship with a sibling who has friends who engage in deviant or risky behaviors can place an adolescent at risk, especially if that adolescent spends large amounts of free time with those friends.

Unique experiences with significant adults such as teachers and coaches also provide opportunities for sibling differentiation. Individual siblings may have very different experiences at school, in sports, or in youth organizations where they are exposed to adults who serve as important role models and mentors. Positive adult role models and mentors can help adolescents develop constructive, socially competent relationships with other adolescents and adults, and these new relationship skills may spill over or transfer into the sibling relationship. That is, the sibling relationship may be strengthened if each of the siblings has the support of adult mentors who encourage them to develop good relationship skills. It does not appear to matter if the support comes from a teacher, mentor, or coach. Siblings who have experiences with positive adult role models may end up looking more similar regardless of whether their experience is in music or in sports. Siblings who develop similar values and beliefs, even when developed through different relationships and experiences tend to have more in common; these commonalities may promote more positive sibling relationships over the long term.

Sibling Strategies to Emphasize Differences and Avoid Comparisons

Until now, we have focused on how outside forces contribute to similarities and differences among siblings, but siblings themselves play a role in acknowledging similarities and differences, in developing some shared bonds, and in carving out unique roles for themselves within the family. A number of theories have been advanced to explain what leads siblings to be more alike or different from one another, and we summarize a few here.

Modeling and imitation are key concepts of Social Learning Theory, which suggest that siblings often exhibit similar characteristics and behaviors because they spend a great deal of time together and learn from one another. It is not unusual for

siblings to adopt similar interests, similar ways of expressing themselves, or behaving in different contexts. Siblings are excellent teachers – it may be a sibling who first teaches an adolescent how to open their locker, respond to a demanding teacher, or manage interest from a potential romantic partner. Thus, adolescents may intentionally or unintentionally adopt characteristics of their siblings – especially the ones that they admire.

Social Comparison Theory helps explain how individuals, and especially siblings, make comparisons between themselves and others to evaluate their similarities and their differences. Adolescent siblings have multiple opportunities every day to draw comparisons between themselves, both large and small. For example, one brother may compare the clothes he got while shopping with mom to those of his brother and decide that he was treated unfairly. Or a brother may compare his access to the family car with that of his elder sister and believe that their parents are favoring her. As discussed earlier, when siblings feel that parents are being unfair or preferential, this can have a negative effect on the sibling relationship.

Deidentification refers to a process, advanced by Frances Fuchs Schacter, in which each sibling in the family is motivated to carve out their own unique identity, and that unique identity is shaped largely in reaction to how they view their siblings' identity. Simply, each sibling tries to differentiate him or herself from brothers and sisters by purposefully selecting or highlighting different characteristics, interests, and activities. For example, if the eldest sibling is known to be an academic superstar, a younger sibling may reason that he may never be able to compete successfully with the elder sibling in this arena, and so may choose to devote his energy to a distinct area that his sibling is not engaged in, such as athletics. Subsequent siblings may then seek out other roles or characteristics that are not already associated with their elder sisters or brothers, for example, by focusing on art or their social life. Younger siblings may also seek out controversial roles, like becoming rebellious, or engaged in deviant or risky behaviors, especially if they feel that all the good roles have already been taken by elder siblings. Deidentification promotes individuality while also minimizing the competition and comparisons that often arise among siblings.

In a related fashion, Parental Identification Theory suggests that when one sibling identifies with mom and the other sibling identifies with dad, they diminish opportunities for comparison and they decrease their competition for parental attention overall. Of course, this strategy becomes more complicated if there are more than two siblings.

These brief descriptions illustrate various methods by which individual siblings may express similar and different characteristics. There is value in both similarities and differences – sharing similar interests and characteristics may increase the likelihood that siblings stay involved with one another, which may strengthen the sibling bond in the long term. At the same time, the expression of a unique identity and a unique set of interests and capabilities may help individual adolescents to each establish a distinct place within the family, which may both lessen the need for comparison and minimize conflict. Of course, most siblings share both some similarities and differences. What we do not yet know is whether it is best for siblings to have more characteristics that they share than they differ. This is a question that future research should address.

Methods for Fostering Prosocial Sibling Relationships

Implicit in the research on sibling relationships is the notion that there is value in helping siblings establish a positive or prosocial relationship. Parents do want their children to get along well, not only because positive sibling relationships contribute to a harmonious home environment, but also because they want their offspring to support one another, especially in the future when parents may be unable to provide support themselves. Most adolescents also prefer to get along with their siblings, as they, like their parents, find high levels of conflict and antagonism to be unpleasant. Siblings who provide support to one another in adolescence are more likely to develop social competencies, perform well in school, and avoid mental health problems such as depression and perceptions of low self-worth. Research by psychologists and sociologists such as Victoria Bedford, Victor Cicirelli, and Ingrid Connidis has demonstrated that social support from siblings continues to be important in later adulthood as it contributes to social functioning and overall well-being.

However, as described earlier, prosocial and supportive sibling relationships do not generally arise magically on their own – rather, it may be necessary to employ prevention and intervention strategies to help adolescents develop a positive relationship.

Prevention

Even in early childhood, it is possible to set the stage for positive sibling relationships. Research suggests that sisters and brothers who spend time together, engage in activities that they both find enjoyable, who are able to avoid large amounts of negative emotions in their interactions, who are able to take one another's perspective or point of view, and who are able to manage conflicts, tend to have more a positive relationship that is likely to last into adolescence. Parents can play an instrumental role in helping young children learn to interact in these ways, for example, by encouraging children to play together, enjoy shared activities, learn how to share, consider one another's perspectives, and negotiate and manage conflicts.

Intervention

When children do not learn these competencies on their own or with their parents' guidance, they may benefit from an intervention program that directly teaches social and emotional skills such as these. Laurie Kramer's More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program (MFWSB) is an example of a preventive intervention program that has been developed on the basis of research on children's sibling relationships and then tested to demonstrate its effectiveness. Developed for 4–8-year-old siblings, the program is expressly designed to instruct children in these social and emotional competencies. In this five-session program, children are taught methods for asking each other to play, learn to take the other's perspective, identify, manage and control the many emotions that naturally occur when interacting with a sibling, as well as resolve conflicts. Children practice these skills with the program facilitators and their parents are taught to serve as coaches as children enact

the skills at home. A series of studies on the More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program has demonstrated its effectiveness in helping siblings behave more positively with one another, especially in terms of their abilities to engage in coordinated play and conversation, take one another's perspective, and manage negative emotions such as frustration and disappointment that occur with some frequency in sibling interactions.

Whereas the MFWSB program is useful for young children, what resources are available to help adolescents get along with their siblings? Unfortunately, the answer is very few. Researchers at Pennsylvania State University, Anna Soli, Mark Feinberg, and Susan McHale, have developed a prevention program for young adolescents (fifth graders), and their younger siblings and parents, that aims to reduce youths' risk for negative adjustment and substance use by decreasing sibling conflict and enhancing sibling warmth, increasing joint involvement in constructive activities, and improving parenting practices around sibling issues such as rivalry and fair treatment. Their Siblings are Special (SAS) program targets children's problem-solving and emotion regulation skills, teamwork, and positive shared activities, and strengthens parents' behavioral management and conflict mediation techniques. These skills are taught to small groups of siblings in 12 weekly after-school sessions. In addition, parents and children participate in three family night sessions in which parents and children practice their new skills. Results on this program's effectiveness are expected to be released this year.

Intervention programs are also under development to address the fact that when adolescents engage in risky, or even delinquent, behaviors, unfortunate consequences may arise for both their siblings and for the sibling relationship itself. Trying to have a pleasant relationship with a sibling who is involved in gangs or who uses substances such as alcohol or drugs can be quite difficult. It is also possible that adolescents (or their friends) who are involved in these activities expose their younger siblings to some of these activities. Younger siblings may be vulnerable in these situations and engage in some antisocial behaviors that they may not have tried were it not for the influence of their siblings. Interventions are needed to help siblings avoid negatively influencing one another in these ways.

Interestingly, most of the approaches that have been developed to help adolescents resist risky and antisocial behaviors have focused either on the adolescents themselves or have incorporated parents into the treatment program. Very few intervention strategies have included siblings as the focus of the treatment. One exception is work conducted by Elizabeth Stormshak and Thomas Dishion, from the University of Oregon, whose EcoFit model aims to first understand the types of dysfunctional behaviors that adolescents demonstrate in terms of the developmental, social, and cultural contexts in which the family operates. That is, they work to understand whether there are factors related to the adolescents' age or developmental level that may be encouraging deviant behaviors, whether there are social factors (e.g., the family's social isolation or the adolescents' poor peer relationships) that may be contributing to deviancy, and finally, whether there are cultural factors (e.g., adolescents in immigrant families may face unique issues that relate to their families' practice of cultural traditions) that should also be taken into account. They then select intervention strategies that are tailored to fit each family's needs for parental management and types of interaction the siblings are experiencing, all with an understanding of the developmental levels of all family members and the stressors that the family as a whole is facing. For example, in families where siblings are colluding or joining together in ways that undermine their parents' authority, the intervention strategies will be aimed at improving parents' ability to end negative cycles of interaction, improve family relationship quality, and reduce siblings' ability to negatively influence family dynamics. In contrast, in families where siblings are already close, the EcoFit model may take advantage of this asset and create additional opportunities for siblings to work together to help solve a family problem. This may have multiple effects of strengthening the sibling relationship and channeling their energy to solve real problems faced by the family, thereby lessening the time and energy sibs may devote together to antisocial activities. For example, the siblings may choose to cook dinner together so that their parents are able to spend more time parenting younger siblings who need their attention.

Finally, current efforts at the Oregon Social Learning Center, led by Lew Bank and his colleagues, directly address the contributions of siblings to developing and maintaining cycles of antisocial behaviors in adolescence. Conflict and antagonism among family members tends to happen in a repeated, cyclic fashion, particularly in unhappy and distressed families. For example, the same type of argument may be repeated over and over again, and over time, the arguments become more intense. If not checked, these conflicts may become violent or abusive. Bank's objective is to develop an intervention program that is based on research findings and takes advantage of strengths in the sibling relationship to interrupt cycles of antisocial behavior occurring in the family. For example, siblings who learn to manage their conflicts can help other family members learn to manage their disagreements in a more effective manner. And parents who support better sibling relationships may find that their conflicts with their children are reduced or are easier to resolve.

Future Directions

According to George Vaillant's multidecade longitudinal study of Harvard graduates, one of the best predictors of adjustment in later life is having had a positive relationship with a sibling in late adolescence or early adulthood. This finding illustrates the importance of better understanding the factors that help adolescents establish positive relationships with their siblings. As discussed in this article, although research that sheds considerable light on these factors is emerging, there is still a great deal to learn. Subsequently, we highlight a few key areas that we hope researchers will investigate in future research.

We must understand how sibling relationships operate in a variety of family forms and structures. Given the increasing prevalence of remarried families, we need to understand in greater detail the factors that promote better relationships among step-siblings. Conflict among step-siblings is a major source of marital distress and can significantly contribute to divorce. Similarly, sibling relationship quality in adoptive and foster families is also critical, as again, chronic conflict in these relationships can also contribute to the dissolution of adoptive

and foster care placements. However, for adolescents who experience the dissolution of their family through divorce, death, or negative life events, and are placed in the foster care system, sibling support may be the difference between adapting well or poorly. Research by Lourdes Linares and others suggest that the old policy of sending individual siblings to different foster placements is often detrimental for individual adjustment and may have negative effects on the sibling relationship over the long term. For some cultural and ethnic groups, siblings serve as primary caregivers, and it is important for the well-being of all siblings to be placed together whenever possible. Fortunately, state and private agencies are increasing efforts to keep sibling groups together, except in the cases of sibling abuse and victimization, in the interest of maintaining family ties among siblings.

Distilling the essential ingredients that promote adaptive sibling relationships in all types of families is critical for the development of effective prevention and intervention programs. These essential ingredients are most likely to be revealed through careful research studies that include a variety of research methods so that the perspectives of multiple family members can be taken into account. The examples that families provide, and the stories that they tell, about sibling relationships are interesting sources of qualitative information that may help researchers and clinicians devise effective prevention and intervention programs. Because individual family members are likely to develop their own understanding of family dynamics and patterns, it is important to conduct both individual and joint (e.g., siblings, spouses, parents, and children) interviews with family members so that we can ascertain the extent to which family members possess a shared or unique understanding of family issues. When family members each have a different understanding of an important event or process (e.g., whether one child in the family is treated preferentially by a parent), communication may be especially poor, perhaps due to a lack of family closeness or high levels of conflict and animosity.

Because family members may not always be aware, or have an accurate perception, of family dynamics, research methods that include the systematic observation of sibling and family interaction have particular value. For example, a study using observational methods may visit adolescent siblings in their home and ask them to discuss a problem they recently experienced in their relationship and try to resolve it. The researchers might leave a video camera running while the siblings work on the problem. Later, the researchers will watch the videotape and use a standard system to record the types of behaviors the siblings engaged in (e.g., loud talking, expressions of anger, problem solving, negotiation, and compromise). Observational methods can reveal patterns of interpersonal behavior that may contribute to (and be statistically associated with) positive relationship quality that even the individuals engaged in this interaction may not understand or be aware of. In combination with interviews and questionnaires, observational methods can advance our understanding of how to best promote positive relationships among siblings.

Finally, research methods that follow the same set of families over time using longitudinal methods are the most powerful tools for elucidating patterns of continuity and change in sibling relationships. Recent developments in statistical techniques, such as structural equation modeling and multilevel modeling, enable researchers to make better use of longitudinal data by evaluating patterns of sibling interaction over time while taking family processes and background variables into account. Many studies using these advanced techniques can be found in the 2005 special issue of the *Journal of Family Psychology* edited by Laurie Kramer and Lew Bank. Furthermore, studies using a sibling design allow researchers to examine the unique and mutual contribution of genes and environments to individual development and sibling relationships. Interested readers will want to refer to a special issue of the *European Journal of Developmental Science* (2009) edited by Alison Pike, for an in-depth discussion of these issues. Finally, longitudinal research will help us determine whether there are some points in child and adolescent development at which siblings are likely to experience changes in their relationship. This will help us understand whether individuals are more receptive or vulnerable at certain points in development toward forming and maintaining prosocial sibling relationships. This information is essential for the development of effective methods that will increase the likelihood that siblings will reap the potential benefits that sibling relationships have to offer throughout life.

Conclusion

This article has aimed to further our understanding of sibling relationships in adolescence by considering three fundamental sets of factors:

1. the quality of the relationship that siblings establish with one another;
2. the family context in which siblings develop their relationships; and
3. the broader social context that exists outside of the family, in which adolescents also operate.

Adolescence is a pivotal point in development for siblings, particularly as individuals face a myriad of social, emotional, and cognitive challenges. Siblings offer adolescents considerable support for mastering each of these challenges – a support that may not be as forthcoming or as useful as from what may be supplied from other relationships that youth experience. We hope that a clearer understanding of the assets and vulnerabilities of these relationships will help individuals develop and take best advantage of the supportive functions of siblings.

See also: Family Organization and Adolescent Development; Parent–Child Relationship.

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