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PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS*

Laurie Kramer and Lisa A. Baron**

Parental appraisals of the quality of their children's sibling relationships, and their standards for sibling relationships, were assessed from 114 parents from 57 intact two-child families. Whereas parents reported being most concerned about Agonism and Rivalry/Competition between their children, the largest discrepancies between parental standards and observations were for behaviors reflecting Warmth. Results support the development of intervention programs that facilitate prosocial sibling behaviors as well as the reduction of conflict and rivalry.

Helping young siblings to get along with one another is one of the most challenging aspects of parenthood. Although the volume of research on sibling relations continues to grow, much of this research does not address parents' real concerns about how to help siblings develop positive relationships (Dunn, 1987; Schachter & Stone, 1987). Furthermore, although many resources are available to help parents reduce conflict and rivalry among their children (e.g., Ames, 1982; Bode, 1991; Faber & Mazlish, 1987; McDermott, 1980; Reit, 1985; Streat & Freeman, 1988; Weiss, 1981), most have not been empirically validated. Additionally, most resources have been developed without the benefit of a systematic assessment of what family members consider to be the most desirable and problematic features of children's sibling relationships. As the effectiveness of an intervention is likely to be enhanced when it is consistent with the needs and desires of the target population, this lack of parental input represents a significant limitation of the applied work to date. Thus, a major objective of the present study was to systematically assess parents' appraisals of the quality of their children's sibling relationships.

The absence of a systematic needs assessment has left us with some basic dilemmas about how intervention and prevention programs for sibling relationship problems should be focused. For example, the issue of whether parents are most disturbed by the presence of frequent conflict or the lack of closeness and warmth between their children remains an empirical question. This issue is important because most of the currently available resources emphasize the reduction or elimination of sibling conflict and rivalry, while devoting almost no attention to the facilitation of prosocial sibling relationships (Kramer & Loula, 1992). In fact, the emphasis on the reduction of sibling conflict may be inappropriate given recent empirical evi-

dence that experiences with non-aggressive sibling conflict may actually promote social development. For example, developmental advances in identity formation (Shantz & Hobart, 1989), negotiating and managing conflicts (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988; Vandell & Bailey, 1992), and in tolerating negative affect (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992) have been linked with non-aggressive sibling conflict. Thus, the push to eliminate or greatly reduce all types of sibling conflict may be misguided given the significance of non-destructive conflict for children's social development.

In addition, we currently know very little about how parental concerns may change as their children develop. Siblings may face different issues regarding their relationship as they mature, and yet the advice offered in most resources is not tailored to children of particular ages. Recent research suggests that several features of children's sibling relationships do change in accordance with development. For example, Buhrmester and Furman (1990) found that both warmth and conflict among siblings decreased from third to twelfth grade. There are also changes in the characteristics of sibling conflict. Young siblings' conflicts center primarily around objects and possessions, whereas conflicts among adolescents are often multidimensional and have no single cause (Raffaelli, 1992; Vandell & Bailey, 1992). Thus, a second objective of the present study was to systematically describe parents' concerns about their children's sibling relationships with respect to children's developmental levels. This study focused on the early stages of sibling relationship development (i.e., siblings aged 14 months to 8 years).

As most of the research on children's sibling relationships has emphasized maternal rather than paternal influences (see Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1992; Brody, Stoneman, McCoy, & Forehand, 1992; Volling & Belsky, in press,

for exceptions), very little is known about whether mothers and fathers share similar concerns about their children's sibling relationships. In the related literature on parenting styles, only low to moderate correlations have been found between mothers' and fathers' reported beliefs about childrearing practices (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Chyi-In, 1991). It is also possible that mothers and fathers have unique perspectives on children's sibling relationships. These parental gender differences may be quite important if they lead to discordant approaches to rearing siblings. Thus, in the present study we seek to ascertain the degree to which mothers and fathers generally share similar concerns and perspectives about their children's sibling relationships.

The final objective of this research was to present a new instrument to assess parental appraisals of children's sibling relationship quality. The few standardized instruments that currently exist focus primarily on children over the age of 8 years (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). None have been developed to describe the relationship between younger siblings. This is a major limitation, as parents of young siblings often perceive difficulties in their children's relationship. For example, Dunn and Kendrick (1982) have shown that children as young as 14 months of age actively engage in both prosocial and agonistic in-

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teractions with their older siblings. Thus, the Parental Expectations and Perceptions of Children's Sibling Relationships Questionnaire (PEPC-SRQ) was designed for parents of children as young as 14 months of age and as old as 8 years.

The PEPC-SRQ was designed to assess parental viewpoints on sibling relationship quality using two complementary strategies. The first strategy, which we identify as the "direct" approach, is one that is commonly used in needs assessment research. Parents are directly asked to indicate how concerned they are about specific aspects of their children's relationship, such as how often they fight, play together, or share toys. This approach is intended to identify the features of children's sibling relationships that are most salient to parents. An alternate tactic, which we label as the "discrepancy" approach, is to evaluate the degree to which parental perceptions of the quality of children's sibling interactions are consistent with their goals and standards for this relationship. According to Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, and Sher (1989), individuals' appraisals of relationships are influenced by several cognitive processes, including standards and perceptions. Standards are defined as, "characteristics that the individual believes a . . . relationship should have" (Baucom et al., 1989, p. 32). In the discrepancy approach, parents' evaluations of their children's sibling relationship quality is based on the discrepancy between what they believe sibling relationships *should* be like, and their perceptions of what their children's relationships *are* like. Thus, parental appraisals are conceptualized in terms of violated expectations (Belsky, 1985; Heider, 1958; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Ladd and Muth Proffitt (Muth, 1991) have successfully followed this approach when assessing parental goals for children's peer relationships. The development of the present instrument was based on their work.

We expect that the integration of the direct and discrepancy approaches may be associated with at least two advantages. First, it may yield a more balanced assessment of sibling relationship quality than either approach may provide on its own. Because of societal stereotypes about conflict and rivalry (Dunn, 1987; Vandell & Bailey, 1992), assessment techniques that rely solely on direct questioning may predispose parents to report that rivalry and conflict are their predominant concerns. They may overlook potential problems with levels of warmth and involvement because these problems are less obvious

and less potentially dangerous to children. However, failure to report low levels of warmth and involvement does not necessarily mean that these processes are not problematic in children's relationships. In fact, one could speculate that a low level of warmth and involvement may place the dyad at risk later (e.g., older adulthood) when support from a sibling may be more crucial. Because the discrepancy approach focuses on intrapersonal concerns (taking into account both parental standards and perceptions of actual sibling behaviors), the resultant data may be less biased by societal stereotypes. Thus, the integration of the direct and discrepancy approaches allows us to assess the degree to which parents are concerned about conflict and low levels of warmth and support between their children by taking into account both reported concerns and an assessment of the degree to which low frequencies of these behaviors violate parental standards.

A second advantage of including the discrepancy approach is that it allows for an examination of the exact areas in which parental perceptions of their children's sibling relationship differ from their standards. This focus may be very helpful for formulating specific intervention strategies.

Accordingly, the PEPC-SRQ includes items that represent both the direct and discrepancy approaches. In the direct approach, parents are asked to rate the extent to which they consider the presence or absence of 24 behaviors to be problematic in their children's relationship. In addition, parents are asked to rate how easily they could improve problematic behaviors if they wished to, and the degree to which they would like help to improve these aspects of their children's relationship. The 24 events, which encompass both positive and negative dimensions of sibling interactions, were derived from research that indicated that sibling behaviors can be reliably described in terms of: (a) prosocial behavior, (b) agonistic or conflictual behaviors, (c) rivalry or competition, and (d) relative status or power (Abramovitch, Pepler, & Corter, 1982; Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985; Kramer & Gottman, 1992; Stocker & McHale, 1992).

In the discrepancy approach, parents are asked to rate how often the 24 events are likely to occur in a "good" sibling relationship. It is important to note that the measure prompts parents to consider a realistic, attainable type of sibling relationship as opposed to an ideal, or potentially unattainable, sibling relationship. As parents are next asked

to assess their own children's relationship on the identical dimensions, the instrument allows for an examination of the discrepancy between parental standards and their perceptions of what actually occurs between their children.

The present study addressed the following primary research questions:

1. Following the direct approach, which sibling behaviors are perceived by parents to be most problematic? Which sibling behaviors are perceived by parents as easiest to improve on their own? Which are the sibling behaviors that parents want the most help to improve?

2. Following the discrepancy approach, to what degree do parental perceptions of their children's sibling relationships depart from their standards for this relationship? This question encompasses three component objectives: (a) to describe the general standards that parents hold for their children's sibling relationships, (b) to identify the sibling behaviors that parents perceive to occur most often in their children's actual sibling interactions, and (c) to determine whether larger discrepancies between parental standards and actual perceptions are found with respect to some aspects of children's interactions than others.

3. To what degree does the discrepancy between parental perceptions and standards correlate with parents' global appraisals of the quality of their children's sibling relationships?

With respect to each of these questions, we evaluate whether the results vary according to: (a) the gender of the reporting parent, (b) the gender constellation of the sibling dyad, and (c) the children's developmental level.

METHOD

Participants

Newspaper birth announcements were used to identify 220 two-parent, two-child families in the county who had a secondborn child between the ages of 14 months and 5 years, and whose sibling was 1.5 to 4 years older. Questionnaires were mailed separately to mothers and fathers, and 159 parents (94 mothers, 65 fathers) responded, yielding a 36% acceptance rate.

In order to compare the responses of mothers and fathers, the present study was based on the responses of 114 parents ($n = 57$ families) in which both parents completed the questionnaires. This subsample consisted of 25 families with secondborn children between the

ages of 14 months and 2.5 years (referred to as the younger group) and 32 families with a secondborn child between the ages of 3.5 and 4.5 years (the older group). Firstborn children averaged 68.66 months ($SD = 19.27$) of age, and the mean age difference between the siblings was 32.75 months ($SD = 9.42$). There were 16 sister-sister pairs, 16 older sister-younger brother dyads, 10 older brother-younger sister pairs, and 15 brother-brother pairs.

The mean age of the parents was 34.10 years ($SD = 4.25$). Median family income was \$40,000-\$49,000 per year. Parents had a mean of 16.29 years of education ($SD = 2.78$). Respondents were predominantly white (98%).

Parents excluded from the present sample because their spouse chose not to complete the questionnaires tended to be female ($n = 38$). When compared to parents who were included in the present sample, no significant differences were found in their ages, ethnicity, income, length of marriage, or children's age group. However, parents whose spouses chose not to participate had significantly less education ($M = 15.33$, $SD = 2.37$).

Procedures

Mothers and fathers received their own copies of the PEPC-SRQ through the mail and were asked to complete the instrument separately from their spouse. In the first portion of the questionnaire, parents' standards for children's sibling relationships were assessed by asking them to imagine two siblings who get along very well. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*), parents rated how often each of 13 positive and 11 negative behaviors (described below) were likely to occur in this good sibling relationship. Parental perceptions of their children's actual behavior were assessed subsequently on a separate page. Parents rated how often each of the same 24 behaviors occurred in their children's sibling interactions (1 = *never* to 5 = *always*) during the past 2 weeks.

The direct approach was also utilized as parents indicated the extent to which they considered the presence or absence of each of the 24 behaviors to be problematic (1 = *not a problem* to 4 = *very big problem*), how easy it would be for them to improve the behavior if they wanted to (1 = *very difficult* to 5 = *very easy*), and whether they wanted help to improve this aspect of their children's relationship (1 = *no help* to 3 = *a lot of help*). Next, parents rated the overall quality of their children's sibling relationship on a 7-point Likert scale (1 =

very poor to 7 = *extremely good*). Demographic information was assessed in the final portion of the questionnaire.

Data Reduction

In order to reduce the number of variables being analyzed, two factor analyses were conducted on the parental responses regarding: (a) parental standards for a good sibling relationship and (b) parental perceptions of their children's actual behavior. The unweighted least squares method of extraction with varimax rotation was used for both factor analyses. Items with factor loadings over .40 were retained for further analyses.

Similar factor structures were found for parental standards and perceptions of children's actual behavior, and three factors were identified: Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition. The Warmth scale ($\alpha = .86$ for parental standards, .86 for perceived behavior) consisted of 13 items: pride, protectiveness, comfort, loyalty, help, kindness, respect, affection, sharing worries, talking to each other, playing together, sharing, and teaching. Agonism ($\alpha = .88$ for parental standards, .73 for perceived behavior) consisted of eight items: fighting over objects, fighting over territory, arguing, aggression, anger, threats, unresolved conflicts, and issuing prohibitions to control the sibling's behavior. The Rivalry/Competition scale ($\alpha = .81$ for parental standards, .76 for perceived behavior) consisted of three items: rivalry, competition, and jealousy.

Because mothers and fathers were not independent groups, factor analyses were also conducted separately for each gender. Similar factor structures emerged, indicating that mothers and fathers in this sample tended to have similar standards and perspectives of actual sibling behaviors.

Summary scale scores were computed by summing across items. In order to facilitate comparisons across the scales, a linear transformation technique was used to re-code the data. This was necessary because the scales were composed of different numbers of items.

Transformed scores were computed using the formula:

$$(\text{Raw scale score} - \text{lowest possible score}) \times 10 / (\text{Highest possible} - \text{Lowest possible score on original scale}).$$

Possible scores on the transformed scales ranged from 0 to 10.

Test-retest reliability was evaluated with 25% of the sample ($n = 29$) who completed the PEPC-SRQ on two occasions spaced 3 months apart. Scores on

Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition standards correlated .74, .86, and .77, respectively, across the two time points. Test-retest correlations for the parental perceptions of children's actual behavior were .71 for Warmth, .47 for Agonism, and .37 for Rivalry/Competition (all $ps < .05$). The marginal test-retest reliability of perceived Rivalry/Competition suggests that the results for this scale should be interpreted cautiously.

In addition, we found little evidence to believe that the parental responses obtained in this study were biased to any significant degree by their partner's responses. Correlations between spouses' responses were generally in the moderate range; when considering all of the summary scores that served as independent or dependent variables in the study, correlations ranged from .07 to .53 (median = .39). Thus, although similar patterns of results were obtained for mothers and fathers, it was clear that individual parents held unique perspectives.

Finally, the construct validity of the instrument was supported in part by the similarity of the factors derived on the PEPC-SRQ to those found using other standardized measures designed for use with parents or with older children. For example, the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire, developed by Furman and Buhrmester (1985), is summarized with four factors: Warmth/Closeness, Rivalry, Conflict, and Relative Status/Power. Similarly, the Sibling Relationship Inventory (Stocker & McHale, 1992), administered directly as an interview with children over age 6, is described with three factors: Affection, Rivalry, and Hostility.

RESULTS

Prior to addressing the specific research questions, it was necessary to determine which demographic variables (i.e., children's age group, sibling gender constellation, and gender of the reporting parent) accounted for significant amounts of variance in the dependent variables. The purpose of these preliminary analyses was to determine which of these demographic variables should be taken into account in subsequent analyses.

A series of 2 (children's age group) x 4 (sibling gender constellation) x 2 (parent gender) MANOVAs, with parent gender as a repeated measure, was conducted using responses to the scales of Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition as dependent variables. A separate MANOVA was performed for each of the five dimensions of parental responses as

sessed with the PEPC-SRQ: (a) perceptions of problematic sibling behaviors, (b) judgments on the ease of improving problematic sibling behaviors, (c) the degree of help wanted to improve problematic sibling behaviors, (d) ratings of how often particular behaviors occur in good sibling relationships (parental standards), and (e) perceptions of actual sibling behaviors.

The analyses consistently failed to demonstrate significant main or interaction effects for children's gender constellation or for parental gender. Thus, data for the four sibling gender constellations were combined in subsequent analyses. In contrast, as mothers and fathers were not independent groups, their data could not be collapsed. A decision was made to use mothers' reports as the primary data source in subsequent analyses. We reasoned that mothers generally spend more time with children, and so may be more aware of subtle variations in sibling behavior.

The preliminary analyses also indicated the absence of effects for children's age group, except when parental perceptions of actual sibling behaviors

served as the dependent measures. Here, a main effect was found for children's age group, $F(1,49) = 12.54, p < .001$. The results of follow-up analyses will be presented in a later section. However, as age effects were only obtained in the investigation of parental perceptions of actual sibling behaviors, data for the two age groups were combined in subsequent analyses except for those involving parental ratings of perceived sibling behaviors.

Parental Perceptions of Children's Sibling Behaviors Assessed with the Direct Approach

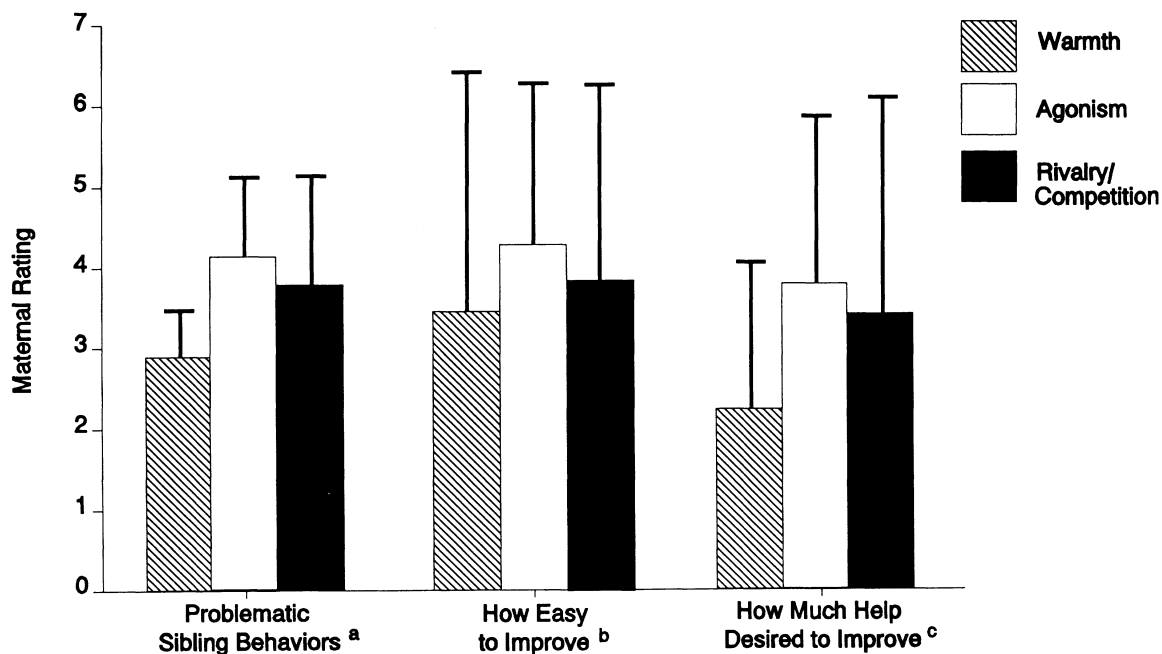
The first research objective was to identify the sibling behaviors that parents directly reported to be most problematic on the PEPC-SRQ. This process included investigating how problematic deficient Warmth, and excessive Agonism and Rivalry/Competition were perceived to be in children's relationships. In addition, we assessed parental perceptions of how easy it would be to improve problematic Warmth, Agonism,

and Rivalry/Competition and the amount of help parents desired to improve problematic behaviors.

Perceptions of problematic sibling behaviors. Figure 1 presents relevant descriptive data in which mothers' perceptions of how problematic Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition were in their children's relationship. Data are collapsed across children's age and sibling gender constellation groupings. As shown in this figure, parents' ratings were in a moderate range: mean ratings did not exceed the midpoint on a 10-point scale.

A series of paired t tests were conducted to evaluate differences in the problematic ratings ascribed to Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition. Given that multiple t tests were necessary, Bonferroni's correction was first used to adjust the experimentwise error rate. Accordingly, alpha was set at $p < .005$. Results indicated that relative to the other dimensions under study, Agonism was viewed by mothers as the greatest problem they faced. Agonism was perceived as significantly more problematic than deficient Warmth,

Figure 1. Maternal ratings of problematic sibling behaviors, collapsed across gender and age groupings ($N = 57$)



^a10-point scale (1 = not a problem, 10 = very large problem)

^b10-point scale (1 = very difficult to improve, 10 = very easy to improve)

^c10-point scale (1 = no help wanted, 10 = a great deal of help wanted)



$t(56) = -13.55, p < .001$. In addition, Rivalry/Competition was rated as significantly more problematic than deficient Warmth, $t(56) = 6.26, p < .001$. Agonism was perceived as only marginally more problematic than Rivalry/Competition, $t(56) = 2.33, p < .02$.

Parental perceptions of the ease of improving problematic sibling behaviors. A related issue was whether parents considered particular sibling behaviors to be more difficult to improve than others. Following the procedures outlined above, paired t tests were conducted to compare mothers' ratings of how easy it would be to improve deficiencies in Warmth, or to decrease the occurrence of Agonism and Rivalry/Competition. As shown in Figure 1, mothers viewed the task of decreasing Agonism between siblings as easier than improving Warmth, $t(56) = -3.34, p < .001$. No significant difference was found between mothers' ratings of the ease of improving deficient Warmth and excessive Rivalry/Competition. However, the difference between Rivalry/Competition and Warmth was marginally significant, $t(56) = 2.12, p < .04$.

Parental desire for help to improve problematic sibling behaviors. As shown in Figure 1, analyses using paired t tests indicated that mothers reported wanting the most help to decrease Agonism and Rivalry/Competition and the least help to increase Warmth. Mothers reported wanting less help for improving Warmth than both Agonism, $t(56) = -8.24, p < .001$, and Rivalry/Competition, $t(56) = -4.42, p < .001$. No significant difference was found between the ratings for desired help with Agonism and Rivalry/Competition.

In summary, maternal responses on the direct questions from the PEPC-SRQ indicated that mothers generally perceived Agonism and Rivalry/Competition to represent the most problematic features of their children's relationship across all age groups. Although the task of increasing Warmth between siblings was viewed as more difficult than decreasing Agonism or Rivalry/Competition, mothers desired the most help to reduce Agonism and Rivalry/Competition.

Parental Perceptions of Children's Sibling Relationship Quality using the Discrepancy Approach

The second research objective was to evaluate the ways in which parental perceptions of their children's actual sibling interactions depart from their

Table 1
Parental Standards and Perceptions of Children's Actual Sibling Behaviors

Age Group	Parental Standards		Perceived Behavior		Discrepancy Score			Range	
	$M^{1,2}$	SD	$M^{1,2}$	SD	t	M	SD	Min	Max
Younger ($n = 25$)									
Warmth	7.82 ^a	0.70	6.49 ^a	0.97	7.21***	1.33	0.92	-2.92	0.31
Agonism	5.06 ^b	1.21	5.53 ^b	0.86	-1.42	-0.47	1.65	-5.00	2.25
Rivalry/Competition	5.49 ^b	1.24	5.01 ^b	1.38	1.22	0.48	1.97	-6.00	4.67
Older ($n = 32$)									
Warmth	8.05 ^a	0.90	7.02 ^a	1.04	4.84***	1.02	1.20	-3.38	0.31
Agonism	5.05 ^b	0.95	5.76 ^b	0.76	-3.52***	-0.70	1.13	-4.00	1.50
Rivalry/Competition	5.31 ^b	1.02	5.58 ^b	1.19	-1.45	-0.27	1.06	2.67	1.33

¹10-point scale (1 = *very rarely*, 10 = *very often*).

²For each age group, means within the same column with different superscripts were found to be significantly different ($p < .005$) using paired t tests.

*** $p < .001$.

standards for this relationship. We began by investigating the general standards that parents hold for their children's sibling relationships.

Parental standards for a good sibling relationship. Mothers' ratings of how often they believed behaviors representing Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition occur in a good sibling relationship were first explored in terms of their relative frequency. As shown in Table 1, maternal standards for Agonism and Rivalry/Competition were at about the midpoint on the 10-point scale. In contrast, maternal ratings of how often warm behaviors occur in a good sibling relationship were closer to 8 on the 10-point scale.

Paired t tests were performed to determine which of the targeted behaviors were expected by mothers to occur most often in a good sibling relationship. Data were again collapsed across age and gender groupings for these analyses. Mothers expected Warmth to occur significantly more often than both Agonism, $t(56) = 13.32, p < .001$, and Rivalry/Competition, $t(56) = 11.35, p < .001$. Although Rivalry/Competition was also expected to occur more often than Agonism, $t(56) = 2.84, p < .01$, this result was only marginally significant. In summary, parental standards do appear to largely emphasize prosocial sibling behaviors.

Parental perceptions of children's actual sibling behaviors. The objective of the next set of analyses was to identify the sibling behaviors that parents perceive to occur most often in their children's actual sibling interactions. Table 1 provides a summary of maternal reports of children's actual sibling behaviors.

As reported above, the preliminary MANOVAS revealed a significant main effect for age of the younger sibling on

parental perceptions of actual sibling behaviors. Follow-up analyses using univariate ANOVAs revealed significant main effects for age on Warmth, $F(1,55) = 12.23, p < .001$, and on Rivalry/Competition, $F(1,55) = 4.15, p < .05$. Parents of younger sibling dyads reported observing less Warmth ($M = 6.29, SD = 0.94$) than parents of older children ($M = 7.07, SD = 0.92$). In addition, parents of the younger siblings reported observing significantly less Rivalry/Competition ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.48$) than parents of children in the older group ($M = 5.58, SD = 1.19$). No significant age effects were found on Agonism.

Within-group analyses were also conducted to see if Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition were reported to occur differentially among younger and older subgroups, respectively. Similar results were found for the two groups. Mothers of both younger and older children reported that Warmth occurred more frequently than Agonism [$t(24) = 4.00, p < .001$ and $t(31) = 4.68, p < .001$, respectively]. Warmth was also reported to occur more frequently than Rivalry/Competition [$t(24) = 4.33, p < .001$ and $t(31) = 4.62, p < .001$, for the younger and older groups, respectively]. When Bonferroni's correction was used, no significant differences were found in the reported occurrence of Agonism and Rivalry/Competition for either age group.

Thus, even though parents of younger sibling dyads reported observing less Warmth and less Rivalry/Competition between their children than parents of older children, within each age group, Warmth was reported to occur more frequently than both Agonism and Rivalry/Competition.

Discrepancies between parental standards and perceptions of actual be-

haviors. The next objective was to determine the degree to which parental perceptions of their children's sibling relationships depart from their standards for this relationship, and furthermore, whether larger discrepancies occur with respect to particular aspects of children's interactions than others. Given that the maternal reports of observed sibling behaviors differed systematically in accordance with children's age, paired *t* tests were computed separately for each age group. These analyses compared the maternal ratings for how often Warmth, Agonism and Rivalry/Competition were expected to occur in a good sibling relationship with maternal ratings regarding the frequency of these interpersonal events in their children's actual interactions. Results are presented in Table 1.

For both age groups under study, mothers reported observing less Warmth in their children's relationship than they desired to see in a good sibling relationship. In addition, mothers of children in the older group reported observing significantly more Agonism than desired.

Predicting Children's Sibling Relationship Quality from Discrepancies between Parental Standards and Perceptions

Finally, we investigated the degree to which the discrepancy between parental standards for children's sibling relationships and their perceptions of their children's relationship was correlated with parental appraisals of the quality of the children's sibling relationship. Discrepancy scores were calculated for each factor by subtracting the parental ratings of their children's actual behavior from the rating pertaining to parental standards for a good sibling relationship. Relatively high discrepancy scores indicated that the parental standards for a given behavior were greater than what parents currently observed. High discrepancy scores on the Agonism and Rivalry/Competition scales indicated that children engaged in fewer of these behaviors that parents expected to see in a good sibling relationship (an adaptive outcome). High discrepancy scores on the Warmth scale indicated that parents wanted to see more Warmth between their children than they currently observed (a less adaptive outcome). Descriptive data on these discrepancy scores are presented in Table 1.

Mothers' ratings of how well the siblings got along served as the criterion measure of sibling relationship quality.

The mean rating of sibling relationship quality was 5.23 (*SD* = 1.23, range 2 to 7).

Correlational analyses were performed to test the strength of the associations between discrepancies in desired versus perceived Warmth, Agonism, and Rivalry/Competition with the maternal ratings of sibling relationship quality. Separate analyses were conducted for mothers of younger and older sibling dyads. With regard to the Warmth discrepancy, the magnitude of the discrepancy score was negatively correlated with parental ratings of sibling relationship quality for mothers of younger ($r = -.38, p < .05$) and older ($r = -.58, p < .001$) children. *R* to *z* transformations indicated that the difference between these two correlations was not significant. These findings suggest that mothers are likely to rate their children's sibling relationship as more positive when children display high levels of warmth towards one another relative to what parents desire to see in a good sibling relationship.

For Agonism, the magnitude of the discrepancy score was positively correlated with sibling relationship quality for both the younger ($r = .68, p < .001$) and older group ($r = .45, p < .01$). *R* to *z* transformations indicated that the difference between these two correlations was not significant, which suggests that parents of both younger and older sibling dyads are likely to rate the sibling relationship as more positive when children exhibit less Agonism than parents desire to see in a good sibling relationship.

A different pattern of results was found for younger and older sibling dyads with regard to Rivalry/Competition. Here, the correlations between the magnitude of these discrepancy scores and maternal ratings of sibling relationship quality were significant for mothers of younger children ($r = .67, p < .001$) but not for mothers of older children ($r = .23, ns$). *R* to *z* transformations indicated that the difference between these two correlations was significant, $z = 2.14, p < .05$. This result suggests that mothers of younger sibling dyads were especially likely to rate their relationship as more positive when children were perceived to engage in less Rivalry/Competition than mothers believe should occur in a good sibling relationship.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that assessment instruments that include complementary strategies for ascertaining parental perspectives on children's

sibling relationships may have advantages over instruments that follow a single approach. In the present study, the integration of the direct and discrepancy approaches in the PEPC-SRQ provided a more comprehensive picture of children's sibling relationships than either approach contributed on its own.

Parental Concerns about Conflict versus Inadequate Warmth between Siblings

As expected, when parents were asked directly about what they perceived to be the most problematic aspects of their children's sibling relationship, they commonly reported that agonistic behaviors, such as conflict, anger, and attempts to control the sibling, were their primary concerns. However, an alternate perspective emerged when we considered how well children's behaviors with their siblings met their parents' standards for this relationship (i.e., the discrepancy approach). In this case, the largest discrepancy between parents' standards and their observations of their children's actual sibling behaviors was in the area of Warmth. Regardless of children's age, parents reported observing less Warmth between siblings than they desired to see in a good sibling relationship. Furthermore, parents' appraisals of the quality of their children's sibling relationship were significantly predicted by discrepancies between their standards for and observations of Warmth. More negative appraisals of sibling relationship quality were obtained when parents reported that interpersonal behaviors such as pride, loyalty, respect, and sharing worries were occurring at lower-than-desired levels.

Taken together, these results suggest that stereotyped views about sibling relationships in American society may lead parents to simply assume that difficulties in their children's relationship stem from excessive conflict and rivalry. In fact, parents may be unaware of the degree to which their perceptions of low levels of prosocial behaviors influence their appraisals of sibling relationship quality. A corroborating finding was that even though Agonism was viewed as relatively most problematic and requiring more help, parents rated it as easier to improve than Warmth. This seemingly contradictory result may appear more coherent if we consider that the popular press has offered a variety of concrete suggestions for improving conflict and rivalry, but few for improving Warmth. Thus, parents may feel that not only is Agonism a dimension of children's sibling relationships that is recognized by many to be problematic, but

that seeking help for this problem is both appropriate and widespread. Furthermore, the availability of intervention strategies (albeit non-tested ones) may lead parents to believe that it is relatively easier to improve Agonism than other dimensions such as deficient Warmth. In sum, the encouragement of Warmth among siblings may represent a very important dimension of young children's sibling relationships that has been overlooked by researchers and practitioners.

Levels of Concern about Children's Sibling Relationships

Overall, parents in the present study viewed their children's sibling relationships rather positively. The present results call into question the widespread belief that parents are quite concerned about children's sibling relationships. However, before drawing such a conclusion, it will be important to demonstrate that parents consider difficulties in children's sibling relationships to be less of a concern than other problems encountered when rearing children. Relevant information may come from studies on parents' perceptions of daily hassles in parenting. To date, this research has not specifically identified the extent to which parents are stressed by characteristics of children's sibling relationships. However, we know that items such as "sibling arguments require referee" are significant contributors to scales of daily hassles in parenting (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990, p. 1631). It is also important to acknowledge that the present findings may also be unique to the current sample as participants were largely from white, middle-class, and highly educated families. We do not yet know how parental standards and perspectives vary in accordance with variables such as socioeconomic status, education, ethnicity, and family structure. Certain difficulties in sibling relationships may be experienced as more serious in some types of families than others.

Developmental Effects

The cross-sectional rather than longitudinal approach employed in this study necessarily restricts the conclusions we may reach about the nature of developmental changes. Nonetheless, the results of this study appear to support the notion that parental appraisals of children's sibling relationships may vary as children develop. Although differences in parental responses in accordance with children's age were not strong—there were more similarities across age groups than disparities—some

qualitative differences were apparent between the younger and older age groups under study. Parents of younger children generally reported observing less Warmth and Rivalry/Competition than parents of older children.

Furthermore, parental ratings of sibling relationship quality for younger and older children were differentially correlated with perceived Rivalry/Competition. For parents of relatively younger children, the perception of more Rivalry/Competition than desired was related to lower ratings of children's sibling relationship quality. In contrast, this relationship between desired-perceived Rivalry/Competition and sibling relationship quality was not found for parents of relatively older children. These results may relate to the finding that mothers of younger children reported observing less Rivalry/Competition than mothers of older children. Thus, a younger sibling dyad who exhibits relatively high levels of Rivalry/Competition may in some ways be unusual and be perceived as having a poor relationship. The results may also indicate that parents of very young siblings face somewhat different issues than parents of older siblings, and may require different types of assistance.

It is important to note that the age range of the siblings in this study was restricted to the early years of childhood. Given that we found some significant differences within this relatively small age range, it is quite likely that parents of older children and adolescents would express a very different set of concerns. This area should be addressed in future research.

Parental Gender Effects

It was interesting that no significant differences were found on any of the key dependent variables in accordance with parental gender. However, given that the correlations between parents' scores on the specific measures were generally in the moderate range, one can conclude that mothers and fathers shared similar but not identical perspectives on their children's sibling relationship. This finding was unexpected, given prior research on parenting styles (Simons et al., 1991) in which mothers and fathers often held divergent viewpoints. The failure to identify parental gender differences in the current study may simply indicate that mothers and fathers are more likely to hold similar perspectives about their children's sibling relationship than about their beliefs about specific parenting behaviors such as harsh discipline. This may be a reasonable assumption if we consider that

parents play very different roles with regard to the parenting of their children as individuals (within the context of the parent-child relationship) than as siblings. When parents report their beliefs about discipline, they are reporting their perspective on their parent-child relationships, in which they play a direct and instrumental role (an "insider" role) and in which their spouse plays an indirect role (an "outsider" role). This situation may lead parents to develop their own unique perspectives on discipline. In contrast, when parents are asked to discuss their children's sibling relationship, they are reflecting upon a subsystem in their family that they have opportunity to observe and are invested in but are not directly a part of. Both mothers and fathers are on equal ground as "outsiders." It may be that by virtue of their mutual "outsider" status, parents are quite likely to talk with one another about their children's relationship. In so doing, they may come to share similar views about what their children's relationship is like, what they consider to be problematic, and how it departs from their standards.

Although no previous data exist to help explain exactly why the present results significantly diverge from the few prior studies that have been conducted, the theoretical significance of this issue is important. We need to better understand the implications of whether mothers and fathers share similar versus different views and perspectives on their children's relationship. Do significant differences between mothers' and fathers' standards and observations lead to discordant approaches to rearing siblings? If so, is this problematic for children's sibling relationship quality?

Implications for Intervention and Prevention

The results of this study suggest that some difficulties in sibling relationships, at least as assessed from the parental perspective, can be described as stemming from either: (a) developmentally inappropriate parental standards or (b) children's failure to meet appropriate parental standards. In the first case, parental standards may simply be too high, given children's developmental capabilities. The finding that parents' appraisals of their children's actual behaviors varied in accordance with children's developmental levels, but that their standards for their children's behaviors did not, suggests that parents may often be unaware of what children are realistically capable of. Family life educators, as well as other intervention agents, may serve as critical resources in helping par-

ents to, first, become more aware of what their standards are for their children's sibling relationship, and second, to evaluate how appropriate these standards are, given the developmental levels of their children. Once this evaluation is completed, parents can be helped to formulate goals and to select strategies for working with their children that are more consistent with their children's capabilities.

In the second case, it may be that parents hold developmentally appropriate standards for their children's sibling relationship, at least in terms of what is normative for their age group; however, their children are not meeting these standards. In this case, the family life educator can work with the parents to: (a) determine the exact areas in which children's behaviors are falling short of the parental standards, (b) generate hypotheses about how the intervention might best proceed (e.g., by focusing on parental standards or sibling behaviors), and (c) design an appropriate intervention. Parental responses on the PEPC-SRQ can be most useful during the assessment and hypotheses-generating phases in identifying the specific areas in which children's behavior is inconsistent with parental standards and with developmental norms.

Family life educators may also play an important role in helping parents to place their understanding of their children's relationship in a developmental context. One strategy could be to provide parents with normative information about how other parents have perceived their children's sibling relationship to change over time. For example, the results of the present study indicate that it may be reasonable to tell parents that greater warmth, as well as greater rivalry/competition, may be expected when children are relatively older. This knowledge may encourage parents to think ahead as to how they might adjust their standards over time. In addition, family life educators may help parents to clarify their goals for their children's relationship in the future, to estimate whether these goals will be consistent with children's developmental abilities, and to select childrearing strategies that are likely to help the family achieve these goals.

Finally, the finding that parents' judgments of their children's sibling relationship quality may be significantly driven by discrepancies between desired and perceived levels of Warmth suggests that this area should be emphasized in intervention and prevention programs. This will require a shift in focus so that the facilitation of positive sibling behaviors and emotions receives adequate em-

phasis along with techniques to reduce and manage destructive forms of conflict and sibling rivalry. Kramer and Washo (1990) have shown that maternal facilitation and reinforcement of prosocial sibling behaviors are associated with more positive sibling interactions, at least when mothers are present.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Several limitations of the current research need to be addressed. First, information was gathered from participants using self-report methods. As noted above, it will be important to replicate these results using a wider range of assessment tools that perhaps include observational measures. For example, it will be particularly important in subsequent research to obtain an independent assessment of sibling relationship quality. In addition, due to the young ages of the children under study, only parents' perceptions of children's sibling relationship were assessed. Very little is known about how parents' and children's perceptions of their sibling relationships may agree. To its credit, the study included both mothers and fathers as informants. Nonetheless, it remains important to supplement this approach with other methods that assess children's perceptions of their own sibling relationships. This approach will require the development of measures that are reliable for use with younger age groups. Furthermore, longitudinal, as opposed to cross-sectional, studies will also be valuable for enhancing our understanding of changes in sibling relationship quality across development.

Additional limitations of the current research stem from the fact that only two-parent, two-child families were surveyed. Furthermore, the participating parents were largely from white, middle-class, and highly educated families. Whereas the current study was designed to restrict the set of variables that might influence sibling relationship quality (e.g., by eliminating from consideration large or divorcing family systems), the generalizability of findings may be limited. Different concerns may arise in families with single or non-biological parents, or in families with more than two children. Furthermore, difficulties with sibling aggression and effective discipline may vary tremendously with ethnic and socioeconomic characteristics. As there have been no studies to date that systematically examine qualities of sibling relationships in accordance with cultural diversity, it will be important to determine the extent to which the pres-

ent findings can be replicated with families who vary more widely in their structure and background.

In summary, this study represented a first step in the systematic assessment of parents' perspectives of the strengths and limitations of their children's sibling relationship. Our results support the application of a developmental perspective for assessing and ameliorating difficulties in sibling relationships. They further support the design of intervention and prevention resources that emphasize not only actions parents can take to decrease negative sibling interaction, but also ways to promote positive sibling relations. We hope to encourage additional research that draws on parental input to help shape both the direction of intervention programs and applied research so that these areas better address families' concerns. Such a program of research should help to further reduce the gap between research and practice.

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