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What We Learn from Our Sisters and Brothers: For Better or for Worse

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Abstract

Siblings have considerable influence on one another's development throughout childhood, yet most human development research has neglected sibling socialization. Through this volume, we aim to enhance our understanding of how siblings play formative roles in one another's social and emotional development. We examine the mechanisms by which children are influenced by their brothers and sisters, clarify the ways in which these mechanisms of socialization are similar to and different from children's socialization experiences with parents, and consider the conditions under which sibling socialization results in positive versus negative consequences for individual development. © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Siblings spend a great deal of time with one another—more than they spend with parents or peers (McHale & Crouter, 1996; Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005)—giving them countless opportunities to learn from one another, examine their similarities and differences, and be influenced by each others' choices and behaviors. In addition to having ample access to one another, siblings share experiences that may have significant meaning and impact on their lives. No one else can fully appreciate (and perhaps commiserate about) the idiosyncrasies of their family life. They alone know what it was like to be raised by their parents and grandparents as their unique family history unfolded. In fact, siblings share experiences that no one else in their lives—not even their parents—may know about. Given these significant attributes, it is curious that so much of human development research neglects the investigation of sibling socialization in favor of an almost total focus on parental socialization. The objective of this volume is to address this gap and examine the ways in which siblings contribute uniquely to one another's social and emotional development.

A clearer understanding of how siblings function as agents of socialization will help answer critical societal questions, such as why some children pursue deviant pathways while others do not. A line of research begun with Patterson (1986) and pursued by Bank, Patterson, and Reid (1996), Conger and Rueter (1996), and others demonstrates that antisocial or risky behaviors in adolescence are related not only to parenting and family structure factors; siblings also have considerable influence. Growing up with a sibling who engages in delinquent behaviors could lead a child on a trajectory that may be quite different than had the sibling been a straitlaced honor student. The development of effective prevention and intervention strategies depends on an accurate understanding of the relative contributions of siblings and parents in shaping individual development.

Through this volume, we aim to enhance our understanding of how siblings play formative roles in one another's social and emotional development. We examine the mechanisms by which children are influenced by their brothers and sisters in order to clarify the ways in which these processes of socialization are similar to and different from children's socialization experiences with parents. Furthermore, we consider the conditions under which sibling socialization results in positive versus negative consequences for individual development. And as we address these issues, attention is devoted to contextual factors that moderate sibling influences, such as family structure, life course events, ethnicity and culture, gender, and demographic indicators.

Through the six chapters in this volume, we address the following fundamental questions:

- Do siblings indeed serve as agents of socialization for one another? How are these processes of socialization similar to and different from parental socialization?

- What are the mechanisms by which this socialization occurs? To what extent are processes such as modeling, social comparison, deidentification, or the direct extension of support responsible for shaping sibling behaviors?
- What are the conditions under which processes of sibling socialization yield positive versus negative outcomes for individual development?
- How can we harness the positive aspects of sibling relationships to foster children's well-being?

In this introductory chapter, we evaluate the premise that experiences with siblings play formative roles for children's social and emotional development. We briefly review research that links sibling experiences with dimensions of individual and family development, and in so doing, we describe sibling socialization processes that range in adaptive qualities. In short, we contend that a host of social and developmental outcomes are likely shaped, at least in part, by factors that directly relate to growing up with a sister or brother.

What (and How) Do Siblings Learn from One Another?

Under what circumstances, and in what ways, do siblings socialize one another? The growing body of research on children's sibling relationships suggests several processes by which sibling socialization likely occurs. These processes can be described using the following incomplete and nonexhaustive set of categories:

- Observational learning and instruction
- Sibling interactions that promote the development of social understanding and socioemotional competencies
- Setting aspirations, identity formation, and deidentification in response to perceived sibling characteristics
- Shared sibling experiences that lead to unique forms of support and understanding
- Nonshared experiences that lead to individual differences and, perhaps, resentment

We briefly describe each of these processes in prelude to their deeper exploration in subsequent chapters. This discussion will set the stage for Tucker and Updegraff's analysis in Chapter Two of the relative contributions of sibling and parental socialization processes—the ways in which sibling socialization processes are similar to and different from parental socialization processes.

Observational Learning and Instruction. Perhaps the clearest form of sibling socialization is the formal and informal instruction that children provide to their sisters and brothers. Older siblings have been shown to be

effective instructors in a variety of complex tasks, such as learning to tie a shoe or operate a camera (Stewart, 1983). Conceivably, elder siblings who are skilled in their style of instruction and their ability to scaffold learning in a developmentally appropriate manner can enable younger siblings to achieve developmental tasks at a relatively younger age. Whereas parents may be excellent teachers of expected behaviors in formal settings (at the dinner table, visiting relatives, going to a museum), elder siblings may be the best authority for learning how to succeed in the world of peers, particularly in contexts external to the home, such as school and the neighborhood (see Zukow-Goldring, 2002). Who better than a sibling can teach a child how to make friends, "act cool," handle insults and slights, open a locker, or rebuff a sexual advance? It is also the case that older siblings learn from their younger siblings—for example, as younger sibs bring unique talents and interests to the relationship.

Even without direct instruction, younger sibs regularly take notice of and often emulate their elder siblings' behaviors. Through both overt modeling and vicarious forms of social learning, younger siblings may become prematurely introduced to the social world of older children and adolescents, which may include learning undesirable as well as desirable behaviors. Rates of teen pregnancy and high-risk sexual behaviors, for example, are higher in families where an elder teen daughter has had a child (East, 1998). Sibling congruence in substance use (Rende, Slomkowski, Lloyd-Richardson, & Niaura, 2005), smoking (Forrester, Biglan, Severson, & Smolkowski, 2007; Harakeh, Engels, Vermulst, De Vries, & Scholte, 2007), and antisocial behaviors (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Williams, Conger, & Blozis, 2007) has also been reported.

Although modeling may be one mechanism underlying this type of sibling influence, it is likely not the only means of transmission. As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, the quality of the sibling relationship may be a critical moderating factor; sibling similarity in adolescent drug use and sexual activity is higher for siblings who share a close relationship (Rowe & Gulley, 1992). Following such a social contagion model, a younger sibling would be at higher risk of modeling an elder sibling's substance use if the pair had a warm relationship and shared mutual friends. Rende et al. (2005) tested this hypothesis using a genetically informed design that controlled for the genetic relatedness of siblings. They found that sibling contact and mutual friendships were a source of social contagion for smoking and drinking regardless of genetic relatedness. Thus, siblings' collusion (coalitions that promote deviance while undermining parental authority) and coparticipation in deviant activities during adolescence may be critical mechanisms of sibling socialization (Snyder, Bank, & Burraston, 2005).

Brody, Flor, Hollett-Wright, and McCoy (1998) point out that younger siblings do not necessarily observe their older siblings' substance use; rather, it may be that elder siblings' attitudes regarding the acceptability of substance use may be tacitly transmitted through sibling interaction (see also Ardelt &

Day, 2002). In line with this view, Pomery et al. (2005) found that substance use among African American adolescents was significantly predicted by elder siblings' earlier reports of their behavioral willingness to use substances, even when controlling for parental substance use, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood variables.

Drawing on research stimulated by Patterson (1986) and Bank et al. (1996), Slomkowski, Rende, Conger, Simons, and Conger (2001) highlight an additional process by which siblings may raise each other's risk for anti-social behavior: training in coercion that is learned and reinforced through repeated and escalating cycles of aversive behaviors performed by parents and children. Sibling conflict and imitation of siblings' antagonistic interactions with parents can also increase the likelihood of coercion among siblings (Snyder et al., 2005).

In summary, children observe and learn behaviors, skills, and attitudes from their siblings that may be quite different from what they learn from their parents. The processes that underlie these types of learning, as well as the circumstances and contexts under which this learning occurs during the course of normative and nonnormative family development, is explored in Chapters Three and Four, respectively.

Promoting Social Understanding and Socioemotional Competencies. Childhood sibling relationships are unique and important contexts for developing social understanding (Dunn, 1988). Linkages between early sibling relationships and later success in interpersonal relationships have been illuminated in several longitudinal studies. For example, Cui, Conger, Bryant, and Elder (2002) demonstrated that supportiveness to a sibling in early adolescence predicted support in children's friendships three years later. Sibling hostility was also predictive of later hostility toward a friend. Cui et al. noted that both sibling supportiveness and hostility are predicted by parenting behaviors; this is in line with their social-contextual perspective that posits that family interactional processes and parenting equip children (with various degrees of success) with social competencies that they can apply to relationships within and outside the family context.

The types of socioemotional competencies that are required of children for successful sibling interactions, especially in early childhood, are considered to be more sophisticated and complex than competencies required for successful interactions with parents (Kramer & Gottman, 1992). Parents invest a great deal of effort in establishing, maintaining, and repairing their relationships with children as they actively seek to understand their children's perspectives, accommodate to their needs and wishes (or provide a rationale for why they will not), and manage conflicts. However, as young children, siblings are less likely to perform these relational tasks and accommodate to one another's interests, needs, and desires. Thus, to achieve successful interaction with a sibling, children are challenged to communicate clearly, enlist persuasive and reasoning abilities, assume the perspective of

another, and manage disagreements and conflicts in ways that may not be as essential with parents (Kramer, in press).

Of course the types of social understanding that are developed in the context of sibling interactions are not always prosocial in nature; social understanding may be demonstrated through interactions that may be perceived as annoying, irritating, or manipulative. Although aversive, these interpersonal processes may be quite sophisticated, reflecting not only a clear understanding of the sibling's unique sensitivities and vulnerabilities, but also skills in taking advantage of another's vulnerabilities to advance one's own position. For example, the ability to successfully cajole, dupe, irritate, or embarrass a sibling may indicate well-developed perspective-taking skills—skills that may not be demonstrated quite as well or as early in other social relationships. Even two year olds have been observed to use their unique knowledge to tease, annoy, or frustrate a sibling (Dunn, 1988). As Pernoff, Ruffman, and Leekam (1994, p. 1228) eloquently stated, "Theory of mind is contagious: you catch it from your sib." Chapters Three and Four provide greater detail about the ways in which sibling socialization processes may reflect or lead to advanced social understanding and socioemotional capabilities.

Setting Aspirations, Identity Formation, and Deidentification in Response to Perceived Sibling Characteristics. Older siblings set a high bar for younger sibs to reach. In a quest to be like their elder siblings, younger children may actually achieve more and at a faster rate than children without older siblings. However, the ability to emulate an elder sibling's achievements may be perceived by younger siblings as excessively challenging or, in some cases, unattainable. Whereas a climate of competition may be created in some families in which less skilled siblings are motivated to keep up with or even exceed their sibling's competencies in a given domain, in other families, less competent siblings may suspend these aspirations and channel their energy into areas distinct from their siblings' expertise.

Along with a shared history, intimate knowledge, and perhaps a desire to emulate one's siblings, research on sibling deidentification suggests that individuals are also motivated to carve out unique identities, which may be shaped in part by their perception of their siblings' attributes and qualities (Schachter, Shore, Feldman-Rotman, Marquis, & Campbell, 1976; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007). As Whiteman, Becerra, and Killoren discuss in Chapter Three, children regularly appraise their own interests and competence in light of their perceptions of their siblings' abilities and accomplishment. The high levels of access and interaction typically experienced by siblings may lead individual children to strive to be different from one another in core areas. As Whiteman et al. (2007) describe, the research offers few clues as to the circumstances that lead sisters and brothers toward emulation versus competition. Although it is not yet clear whether processes of modeling or deidentification better explain sibling socialization, exploration

of these processes should contribute to our understanding of similarities and individual differences among siblings.

Shared Experiences That Build Unique Forms of Support and Understanding. Sibling relationships can be important sources of support and validation for young children. Fifth- and sixth-grade children in Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) classic study reported that companionship (93 percent), admiration (81 percent), prosocial behaviors (77 percent), and affection (65 percent) were the most common positive qualities of their sibling relationships. However, negative qualities, such as antagonism (91 percent) and quarreling (79 percent), were also commonly reported, which is consistent with the view that sibling relationships are best described as ambivalent (Dunn, 1988), marked by fluctuating positive and negative relationship dynamics.

Growing up in the same family can facilitate a sense of solidarity that is difficult to achieve in other relationships. In many low-income families, and in cultures that emphasize familism (a value for cohesive family relationships; Updegraff et al., 2005), children may be regularly expected to care for younger siblings (Weisner & Gallimore, 1977; Zukow-Goldring, 2002). Early caregiving experiences may contribute to the development of sibling empathy, perspective taking, and caring (Stewart & Marvin, 1984). For example, Teti and Ablard (1989) found that many older siblings spontaneously soothe, comfort, and care for their infant siblings when distressed.

When parents face difficulties in their lives, children are aware of this. Sibling support may be especially important when parents are less available, as siblings often respond to parent unavailability by becoming "more responsible and nurturant" (Bryant & Crockenberg, 1980, p. 542). Sibling bonds have been shown to be helpful to young children coping with family transitions and stressors, such as parental divorce (Jenkins, 1992) or financial hardship (Conger, Conger, & Elder, 1994). With greater knowledge and maturity, older siblings may help younger siblings clarify their understanding of family stress and correct misunderstandings. Sibling affection may curtail the level of internalizing behavior problems faced by children experiencing significant stressful life events (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). However, negative life events and conditions may also create barriers to siblings' provision of support, or in cases such as foster care placement, to even maintain a relationship at all (Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, & Ashare, 2005). Barriers and constraints to sibling socialization and support are discussed by Conger, Stocker, and McGuire in Chapter Four. Evidence presented in this chapter suggests that challenging life experiences may disrupt social processes between siblings; for example, when support from a sibling is not available during a time of stress or when sibling contributions are counterproductive, outcomes for individual children may be less favorable. Additional implications of sibling

support for advancing children's well-being are explored by Stormshak, Bullock, and Falkenstein in Chapter Five.

Nonshared Experiences That Lead to Individual Differences and Perhaps Resentment. Although siblings certainly share a host of common experiences, we know that even when raised by the same parents, individual siblings may be treated quite differently, creating a nonshared environment for development (see McHale, Crouter, McGuire, & Updegraff, 1995; McGuire, 2002). In fact, even when parents treat siblings equally, individual children may have unique interpretations of these parental actions, perhaps due to differences in age, birth order, gender, personality, or other contextual factors. In this way, siblings may generate their own nonshared experiences, which may represent potent socializing influences on children's personal development.

Siblings have been described as vigilant in detecting instances in which they are treated differently by parents, consistently forming attributions about why they are treated differently (Kowal & Kramer, 1997) and appraising the fairness of these behaviors (Kowal, Kramer, Krull, & Crick, 2002; McHale, Updegraff, Jackson-Newsom, Tucker, & Crouter, 2000). Differential experiences that are judged to be unfair are linked with poorer sibling relationship quality, individual well-being, and parent-child relationships. In particular, children who report being unfavored are more likely to report depressive symptoms (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2008), lower self-worth (Kowal et al., 2002; Shebloski, Conger, & Widaman, 2005), and greater externalizing and internalizing behavior problems (Conger & Conger, 1994; Kowal et al., 2002; McHale et al., 2000). Compounding these undesirable outcomes of parental differential treatment is the finding that siblings and parents report rarely discussing issues relating to differential treatment (Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2007), thereby limiting opportunities for children and parents to consider and correct unfair or insensitive treatment, and the resentment that may accompany such treatment. Chapters Three and Five address the ways in which nonshared experiences play a role in sibling socialization.

Sibling Socialization Outcomes for Individual Development. How can we take advantage of our growing understanding of sibling socialization processes to promote better outcomes for siblings? Stormshak, Bullock, and Falkenstein tackle this question in Chapter Five as they explore ways to harness sibling socialization processes that have been linked with positive outcomes while minimizing processes that foreshadow negative outcomes, in order to foster children's well-being. They advocate for an ecological approach to family intervention tailored to the needs of individual families while taking into account several key contextual and developmental factors. Their EcoFIT model (Dishion & Stormshak, 2007) explicitly supports appropriate forms of sibling interaction while strengthening parental management practices to improve the well-being of high-risk youth.

A greater understanding of sibling socialization processes will contribute to the development of prevention strategies that may help young

siblings set their relationship off on a positive trajectory. Preventive intervention programs, such as More Fun with Sisters and Brothers (Kennedy & Kramer, 2008), intentionally build on socialization processes that promote the development of social understanding. Four- to eight-year-old siblings are taught a set of social and emotional competencies that have been identified in previous research as contributing to prosocial sibling relationship quality. Improvements in emotion regulation gained through the program have been linked with more frequent prosocial sibling interactions (Kennedy & Kramer, 2008). In addition, it appears that young children carry these prosocial skills into age-mate peer environments, such as child care settings, thereby enhancing opportunities for positive peer relationships.

As Stormshak, Bullock, and Falkenstein describe in Chapter Five, the promotion of successful sibling relationships and individual well-being is likely to be advanced through many of the key socialization processes outlined in this chapter.

Conclusion

Time magazine's Jeffrey Kluger (2006) contends that siblings are the people who "make you who you are" (p. 1). Sibling relationships are considered fundamental relationships that have an enduring impact on an individual's character and success in future relationships. Although the jury is still out as to whether sibling relationships are as potent as this statement contends— and if these relationships are more influential than other relationships that children have—it is fascinating to consider, as we do in this volume, the myriad ways that siblings may shape one another's development.

Potentially the longest relationships that an individual will have with any family member, sibling relationships offer countless opportunities for affecting each other's lives. Our ability to fully understand and harness sibling influences has critical implications not only for the development of effective prevention and intervention strategies that will promote successful sibling relationships but also has the potential to improve individual well-being across the life course.

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