

# SIBLINGS

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In this chapter, we examine how siblings and sibling relationships affect, and are affected by, other family relationships. One key objective is to help researchers, educators and practitioners move beyond the traditional parent-driven model of how families operate to explore some of the ways that children—who are growing up with siblings—also affect the quality of family life. In so doing, we will consider some of the mutual influences of parent–child, marital, and sibling subsystems over the life course. As we examine relevant research and theory, we aim to enhance our understanding of the roles that sibling relationships play in promoting resilient families. More specifically, we will ask whether positivity in sibling relationships results in better functioning for individuals, parents, and for families as a whole—and, if so, whether this is true across the life course.

In the United States, approximately 85% to 90% of families include multiple children (Milevsky, 2011). This means at least two things: First, children largely grow up in contexts that include other children, each of whom faces her or his own developmental challenges. And, second, that in addition to meeting the unique needs of each of their children as individuals, parents are also challenged to support and manage their children's relationships with one another (Dunn, 2014; Kramer, 2010). The implications of these two factors are powerful. At the very least, they require researchers, educators, and practitioners to move beyond the “social address

models” of sibling relations that are concerned with the potential influences of immutable factors, such as birth order, age spacing, and sex constellation, and to examine the dynamic qualities of sibling relationships and their role in family systems. In this chapter, we draw on social learning (Bandura, 1969) and family systems (Minuchin, 1974; see also Chapter 1, this volume) theories, as well as ecological frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; see also Chapter 9, this volume), to explore fundamental issues in sibling relations across the life course, such as

- Sibling socialization: How do interactions with siblings facilitate positive and negative developmental outcomes? Are there critical points in development (e.g., adolescence, the transition to adulthood, adult and aging sibling relationships) in which these influences may be particularly significant?
- Sibling support: What roles do sibling relationships play when families are confronted with negative life events such as divorce, the death of a family member, the entrance of children into substitute care following child abuse or neglect, and economic downturns?
- Sibling conflict: What is the significance of sibling conflict and its management for child and family development?
- Parenting siblings: What are the joys and tribulations of parenting siblings, from early childhood

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to adolescence and emerging adulthood? How do parents' experiences of stress, depressive symptoms, emotional flooding, and other forms of emotional dysregulation affect their ability to help their children develop positive relationships?

- Enhancing sibling relationship quality: Drawing from the collective research literature, how can we best support families with multiple children? What types of evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies are available to promote positive sibling relationships?

## SIBLING SOCIALIZATION

*Socialization* is the process by which new members of a group learn attitudes, beliefs, and customs from older members. According to Grusec (2002), the socialization of new or younger group members is necessary to assist them in the “acquisition of skills necessary to function successfully as members of their social group” (p. 143). The socialization of firstborn children is fairly straightforward; parents serve as the primary agents of socialization, assisted by grandparents, aunts, and uncles, as well as by members of formal institutions such as religious groups and preschools (Dunn, 2014). However, the equation changes when a second child enters the family; for that child, there is also an older sibling who is already a functioning member of the family and who contributes to his or her socialization.

Across development, elder siblings are well positioned to offer strategies for negotiating family dynamics as well as those that occur in the larger contexts of schools and neighborhoods. Guidance and advice on sensitive personal issues from a near-age sibling is often better received than similar advice from a parent or a teacher (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005). In fact, siblings who live in the same household have multiple opportunities each day to socialize one another, at least on an informal level. Nonetheless, not being adults, elder siblings of young children are often overlooked as potent agents of socialization by family members, at least in Western societies (Dunn, 2014; Kramer & Conger, 2009). However, this is not necessarily true across the globe; in societies that

stress the exchange of help and support among children, such as those in Mayan Mexico and Southeast Asia, older siblings are acknowledged as primary agents of socialization and caregiving beginning at a very young age and continuing into adulthood (Maynard, 2002; Nuckolls, 1993; Zukow-Goldring, 2002).

There are a number of theories that help explain socialization processes, and in particular, those processes that relate to how older siblings may come to serve as effective agents of socialization for their younger siblings. We examine some of the most commonly referenced theories next.

## THEORIES OF SOCIALIZATION

The theories and constructs most often invoked when examining socialization processes include attachment theory (see Bowlby, 1988; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005), social learning theory (see Bandura, 1969; Patterson, 1982), and social comparison processes such as sibling deidentification and parental differential treatment (see review by Whiteman, Becerra, & Killoren, 2009). Due to space limitations, we do not discuss the more familiar theories here, but limit our discussion to concepts and theories developed within sibling research (i.e., sibling deidentification and parental differential treatment). For readers interested in learning more about the history and development of research on socialization, we recommend the *Handbook on Socialization*, edited by Grusec and Hastings (2014), and, in particular, the chapter on sibling socialization by Judy Dunn.

As discussed below, the more familiar social learning theory (e.g., Patterson, 1986) describes mechanisms by which siblings learn from and emulate one another. In contrast, the construct of *deidentification* explains a process by which individual siblings may differentiate themselves and establish their own unique identity, role, or niche within the family system; this identity is shaped, in part, by that individual's perceptions of their siblings' identities (Schachter, Shore, Feldman-Rotman, Marquis, & Campbell, 1976). For example, a boy who views his brother as an exceptional piano player may feel that he could never surpass his sibling's achievements

and so gravitates toward a totally different outlet for his interests, such as basketball. Whiteman and Christiansen (2008) found that 30% to 40% of siblings reported taking steps to differentiate themselves from their sisters or brothers in some way and thereby reduce competition. Thus, deidentification may help explain why some siblings are able to avoid damage to their relationship by decreasing the rivalry and conflict that may arise out of social comparisons (Feinberg & Hetherington, 2000; Whiteman, McHale, & Crouter, 2007).

In addition to the tactics that siblings may use to establish their unique niche in the family, another factor that contributes to sibling socialization is *parental differential treatment*. Daniels and Plomin (1985) described parental differential treatment as those unique behaviors parents exhibit toward individual offspring that may lead siblings raised in the same family to seem very different from one another. Significant differences in parent–child warmth and hostility have been associated with internalizing and externalizing behavior problems in children (Buist, Deković, & Prinzie, 2013) as well as lower levels of sibling warmth and positivity (Shanahan, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007). Conger and Conger (1994) found that parental differential treatment was associated with intersibling differences in adolescents' delinquent behaviors. Furthermore, McGuire, Manke, Eftekhari, and Dunn (2000) showed that children who perceived higher levels of differential treatment were also more likely to report conflicted relationships with their siblings. Kowal and Kramer (1997) extended this line of research to show that siblings often evaluated the fairness of parental differential treatment; siblings who reported that differential treatment was warranted, perhaps because it was performed in the service of meeting the unique needs, characteristics, and interests of individual children, reported more positive relationships with siblings than those who perceived parental differential treatment to be unfair. Interestingly, preferential treatment is not limited to childhood; elderly mothers report preferences for certain children to serve as caregivers, regardless of their proximity and availability, contributing to sibling conflict in adulthood (Suitor, Gilligan, Johnson, & Pillemer, 2014). Experiences of maternal differential treatment in

midlife is associated with feelings of depression and psychological distress (Suitor, Gilligan, Peng, Jung, & Pillemer, 2017). Thus, parental differential treatment may impact sibling relationships throughout the life course.

Finally, processes of sibling socialization need to be considered with respect to the social contexts in which siblings operate, including families (in accordance with family systems theory; see Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974; see also Chapter 1, this volume), and by the social and organizational groups in which individuals operate (in accordance with the ecological framework of human development; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; see also Chapter 9, this volume). In the following sections, we use these theoretical constructs to consider how siblings may serve as agents of socialization and sources of support throughout life, especially during times of family stress.

## SIBLING SUPPORT ACROSS THE LIFE COURSE

Some studies have suggested that sibling support gradually decreases across childhood and adolescence (e.g., Buhrmester & Furman, 1990; DeRosier & Kupersmidt, 1991). However, Feinberg, McHale, Crouter, and Cumsille (2003) found that sibling support increases between the ages of 12 and 14 years; Branje, van Lieshout, van Aken, and Haselager (2004) corroborated these findings with younger siblings between the ages of 11 to 13. Oliva and Arranz (2005) asked adolescents, "What does having a brother or sister mean to you?" More than 41% responded with positive dynamic characteristics such as companionship, trust, and intimacy. This is consistent with Goetting's (1986) finding that individuals consider siblings to be important sources of support across the life course. During emerging adulthood and beyond, sibling relationships are generally characterized with greater warmth and less conflict as compared with those during adolescence (Conger & Little, 2010). This may occur because daily contact is no longer likely (which may decrease the odds of sibling arguments) and the control that parents exert over these relationships is reduced (Conger & Little, 2010).

Supportive sibling relationships may be important for navigating new challenges introduced in early adolescence, particularly for younger siblings who may benefit from knowledge and advice extended by their older siblings. In particular, adolescents often turn to older siblings for support when addressing problems that occur both within (e.g., managing relationships with parents) and beyond (e.g., managing relationships with peers and schoolmates) the confines of the family (Tucker, McHale, & Crouter, 2001). Adolescents also often report that siblings are important sources of intimacy, companionship, and support, particularly when addressing family issues (Lempers & Clark-Lempers, 1992; Tucker et al., 2001). In fact, Costa Rican children reported that they receive more support from siblings (and mothers) than from other close contacts such as fathers, best friends, grandparents, and teachers (DeRosier & Kupersmidt, 1991). Below, we briefly examine the evidence that sibling support is associated with beneficial outcomes for individuals during childhood, adolescence, emerging adulthood, and adulthood.

### **Sibling Support Is Associated With Positive Individual Outcomes**

Although few studies have directly assessed supportive sibling relationships during childhood, longitudinal research has revealed that perceptions of sibling support during adolescence positively predicts competence, autonomy, connectedness with siblings, and life satisfaction during emerging adulthood (Hollifield & Conger, 2015). Furthermore, adolescents who perceived that their siblings validate their beliefs and feelings tended to report a more positive self-concept, a sense of autonomy, and greater self-esteem (Dailey, 2009), as well as more positive peer relationships (Yeh & Lempers, 2004).

Adolescents' perceptions of high sibling support and relationship quality are concurrently associated with greater academic motivation and a positive attitude toward school (Alfaro & Umaña-Taylor, 2010). Perceived support from a sibling during adolescence is also linked with greater academic achievement during emerging adulthood, most likely because sibling support promotes academic engagement (Melby, Conger, Fang, Wickrama, & Conger, 2008).

A cross-sectional study of emerging adults found that perceptions of greater sibling support were associated with elevated self-esteem and life satisfaction as well as less loneliness and depressive symptoms (Milevsky, 2005).

In a remarkable and extensive longitudinal study of children growing up in Kauai, Hawaii, Werner (1995) showed that having an emotionally stable individual to rely on, such as an older sibling, enabled individuals who were at risk for chronic poverty, family discord, parental psychopathology, or divorce during childhood to become resilient and become well-adjusted adults. In a similar vein, during later adulthood, sibling support has been found to be beneficial for maintaining personal well-being (Cicirelli, 1989; Connidis, 1994; White & Riedmann, 1992). In particular, support and closeness extended by a sister is associated with lower levels of depression in later life (Cicirelli, 1989). Taken together, the results of these studies suggest that supportive siblings contribute to the maintenance of psychosocial adjustment for individuals across the life course.

### **Sibling Support in Response to Negative Life Events**

Following the tenets of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988; Hazan & Shaver, 1987), social learning theory (Bandura, 1969; Patterson, 1986) and family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Fingerman & Bermann, 2000; Minuchin, 1974), the provision of sibling support, particularly from older to younger siblings, does appear to facilitate individuals' adaptation to family stress and negative life events. For example, in one study, children in middle childhood who experienced a highly stressful family life event (e.g., an accident, illness, death) reported fewer internalizing behavior problems across 2 years if they perceived their older sibling to be affectionate (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007); this was true even when accounting for the effects of mother-child relationship quality. Thus, sibling support may act as a buffer between family stress and later developmental outcomes, above and beyond maternal support. These findings are in line with a model proposed by Conger, Stocker, and McGuire (2009) in which supportive sibling interactions are thought to alter

the associations between parental characteristics and challenging life experiences, such that the effect of negative experiences on individual outcomes is lessened. The following sections review the role of sibling support in response to specific life stressors, including economic pressure, divorce, the death of a family member, foster care placement, and childhood bullying and abuse.

**Economic pressure.** Conger, Conger, and Elder (1994) found that, in early adolescence, perceptions of greater support from older siblings lessened the association between parental hostility and younger siblings' externalizing behavior when families were facing significant economic pressure. During emerging adulthood, Melby et al. (2008) found that initial levels and change in sibling closeness during adolescence mediated the association between socioeconomic status and academic attainment. Taken together, these findings support the notion that positive qualities in sibling relationships in adolescence and emerging adulthood promote individual well-being and educational attainment even in the face of significant economic pressures.

**Parental and individual divorce.** From childhood to adulthood, sibling relationships can provide types of emotional support that may be quite helpful when coping with one's parents' or one's own divorce (see Chapter 38, this volume). In a retrospective qualitative study, Abbey and Dallos (2004) found that female college students valued the support of siblings when parents became emotionally absent during divorce, especially when they shared feelings of closeness and mutual experiences. Similarly, Jacobs and Sillars (2012) conducted retrospective interviews with adults and found that perceptions of sibling availability and companionship provided reassurance and promoted resilience when parents divorced during their childhood, especially when emotional support was experienced as enhancing their sense of stability and shared knowledge. When parental support was unavailable, siblings reportedly compensated by providing more extensive support to one another. In adulthood, qualitative studies have shown that in the event of one's personal divorce, many adults report feeling increased closeness to siblings (Connidis, 1992).

**Death of a family member.** Sibling support plays an important role in the event of a family member's death. Interviews with adults suggest that reminiscing with a sibling about a deceased parent not only provides a critical source of support through the grieving process but also enables siblings to strengthen their relationship (Connidis, 1992; Rosenblatt & Elde, 1990). Similar processes were in play when a sibling died, with respondents reporting becoming closer to and improving their ties with surviving siblings (Connidis, 1992). These studies emphasize the importance of connecting with siblings and exchanging support as potentially helpful mechanisms to cope with the loss of a family member. Chapter 36 (this volume) provides additional information about the role of sibling relationships during times of loss.

**Foster care placement.** A growing literature on foster care placement suggests that sibling contact and support can provide many developmental benefits for children (see Shlonsky, Bellamy, Elkins, & Ashare, 2005). For example, emerging adults who were aging out of foster care reported greater competence in the areas of education, occupation, housing, relationships, and civic engagement if they had spent more time co-placed with siblings in foster care as children (Richardson & Yates, 2014). Furthermore, for adolescents in foster care, sibling relationship qualities, such as support, positively predicted aspects of self-concept including acceptance, self-efficacy, psychological maturity, and activity, with the amount of contact with siblings magnifying the strength of these associations (Mota & Matos, 2015). Thus, access to siblings and the exchange of support can promote resilience when children are placed with siblings in substitute care. For interested readers, Chapter 42 (this volume) summarizes additional research relevant to foster care.

**Child bullying and abuse.** Evidence is accumulating that supportive sibling relationships can buffer the negative outcomes associated with bullying and forms of child abuse. For example, sibling support significantly predicted adolescents' emotional and behavioral adjustment following experiences of bullying victimization, in comparison with adolescents who did not have such experiences (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010). A

qualitative study conducted in South Africa suggested that supportive sibling relationships act as one source of resilience against child sexual abuse (Vermeulen & Greeff, 2015). Specifically, sibling relationships helped children focus their attention on positive thoughts, such as playing and becoming closer with a sibling, in place of ruminating about their experiences of abuse. Additional information may be found in Volume 2, Chapter 30, this handbook.

### **Supportive Sibling Relationships and Family Resiliency**

One of the primary principles of family systems theory (Cox & Paley, 1997; Minuchin, 1974) is that families seek homeostasis and work to stabilize and adapt their modes of operation and relationships when confronted with stress or significant environmental changes. The examples presented above provide compelling evidence for the proposition that the exchange of support between siblings may represent one important mechanism by which family members adapt to stressful life events, thereby contributing to the resilience of individuals and the family as a whole (see also Chapter 13, this volume). But, how exactly does this process occur?

Although we do not yet know all the mechanisms by which sibling relationships contribute to family stability and adaptation to stress and change, several mechanisms seem possible. For example, it could be that when siblings exchange support and help one another, their parents are free to devote more resources to meeting the challenges at hand, such as having more time available to find or perform work or for resolving mental health or substance abuse issues. It is plausible that as children provide direct support to one another, they also may provide instrumental or emotional forms of support to their parents; for example, by being more helpful and cooperative in responding to parental requests. Alternately, it is possible that parents are responsive to increases in sibling support, perhaps leading them to feel more satisfied in their role as parents and less emotionally aroused or irritated when stressors do arise (Ravindran, Engle, McElwain, & Kramer, 2015). For example, Ravindran et al. (2015) found that after participating in a sibling-focused intervention that led

to more positive sibling engagement, parents reported experiencing greater emotion regulation themselves. As a result, parents may be more able to lead the family system through challenging moments in time, helping the family achieve a more adaptive state of organization and function. A better understanding of how sibling support contributes to individual and family well-being is needed to evaluate the relative likelihood of these alternate pathways.

Next, we examine how families experience the opposite of sibling support—conflictual and antagonistic sibling interactions—to explore what individuals may learn from these types of interactions.

### **SIBLING CONFLICT AND ITS MANAGEMENT BY CHILDREN AND PARENTS**

It's no surprise that when asked what concerns them most about their children's relationship, that parents consistently nominate conflicts between their children as their chief concern (Kramer & Baron, 1995). Clearly, popular press writers have picked up on this issue, as they offer countless sources of advice about how parents could better manage sibling strife (Kramer & Ramsburg, 2002). But, while few could disagree that pervasive sibling conflicts depress the quality of family life, we need to carefully examine the evidence behind these assertions.

First, is sibling conflict a top concern for parents? When asked directly about the degree to which sibling conflict represents a problem in their household, parents do endorse fighting among their children as the top complaint (Kramer & Baron, 1995). However, we find a different answer when the question is asked from an alternate perspective. When parents of young children are asked to describe the characteristics of a "good" relationship between children who resemble their own in terms of age and sex constellation, and then these characteristics are compared with parents' ratings of their own children's relationship, it is actually low levels of sibling warmth and engagement—closeness and not conflict—that best accounts for the discrepancy (Kramer & Baron, 1995). This suggests that a focus on building closeness between siblings should take

priority over attempts to reduce or eliminate sibling conflict. We will return to this point later in the chapter.

Second, should we try to help families eliminate sibling conflict? Not only might it seem an impossible task to eliminate all forms of conflict between siblings, it might not even be advisable. Studies of conflict between children and their friends have taught us that children learn a great deal through the process of conflict and that, perhaps unexpectedly, there are developmental achievements that can be attained by experiencing and learning to manage conflict (e.g., Conger, Williams, Little, Masyn, & Shebloski, 2009; Howe & Ross, 1990). Not only do children learn how to engage in conflict behaviors and defend themselves and their point of view (which could be very important when faced with a bully, or later in life, an overly demanding boss), but they learn how to regulate the sometimes intense emotions that accompany conflict. Having experience in clearly stating your position in an argument and standing your ground without breaking into tears or shaking are important life skills that can be developed via sibling conflicts. But even more importantly, engaging in conflict enables children to acquire skills in managing, and hopefully, settling conflicts. Furthermore, engaging in conflict within the safe confines of the sibling relationship (a sibling cannot truly reject you or end the relationship as a friend could), offers unique opportunities to practice these conflict management skills in the face of considerable strife. This is consistent with results long found in the broader couple and parenting literatures that it is the ability to manage conflict, and not the absence of conflict *per se*, that is most strongly related to more positive marital relationships (Gottman, 1979; Masarik et al., 2016) and children's well-being (Cummings & Davies, 1994).

Third, if it is the management of sibling conflicts that is important, and not its elimination, what type of parental responses work best? To address this question, Kramer and her students asked parents to rate how effective they thought various strategies were in terms of helping their children manage conflicts. In general, parents endorsed child-centered strategies, such as working with both children to help them find an agreeable solution to their dis-

agreement, as most effective (Perozynski & Kramer, 1999). They rated authoritarian strategies, such as punishing, threatening, or separating children, as relatively ineffective. And, they rated parents' failure to respond, or ignoring the conflict, as least effective. To find out whether these were the strategies parents normally use, and whether they had the types of effects parents thought they had, Kramer's team then fitted the young siblings with wireless microphones, let them roam around their homes as they normally would, and asked parents (one at a time but in a random order) to listen to their children's conversations on a receiver, and respond as they thought best. They waited to hear children engage in conflict, and then the team watched what parents did. Surprisingly, the strategies that parents rated as least likely to be effective—ignoring the conflict—occurred most often. Kramer, Perozynski, and Chung (1999) further found that sibling conflict was most likely to continue when parents did not respond (or when they used authoritarian methods). The strategy that was endorsed most strongly—collaborative problem solving—occurred least often, yet it was linked with the most positive outcomes for children. Puzzled that parents were the least likely to enact the strategy they rated as most likely to be effective, Kramer et al. found that parents reported being least confident about their abilities to perform child-centered strategies, such as collaborative problem-solving. Clearly, parents need help to learn and apply these promising techniques.

Many parenting resources suggest that parents should not intervene in their children's conflicts because their involvement and attention reinforce the future occurrence of conflict. Is this true? Just as very few children indicate that they fight with their siblings in the hope that their parents will pay more attention to them, available research also suggests that this is not the case (Prochaska & Prochaska, 1985). As discussed above, in the absence of parental intervention, young children tend to continue fighting (Kramer et al., 1999). Less conflict and more constructive outcomes occur when parents work directly with their children to express their points of view and use reason to settle their disagreement (Siddiqui & Ross, 2004).

Are young children capable of managing disagreements without parental intervention? The research to date suggests that there are some basic skills that children need to acquire in order to resolve conflicts. Children can learn these skills, but they do not develop automatically; in fact, children under the age of 8 years are unlikely to have developed these competencies without explicit training (Kramer et al., 1999). In the More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program, Kramer and her colleagues (Kennedy & Kramer, 2008) developed a method for systematically teaching children as young as age 4 the component steps of conflict management, using a problem-solving approach. Further, Siddiqui and Ross (2004) developed techniques to teach parents how to impart mediation skills to their preschool-aged children. And, Feinberg, Solmeyer, et al. (2013) have been successful in instructing children in middle childhood and early adolescence in these competencies as part of their Siblings Are Special program.

While these findings make a great deal of sense when considering young children's sibling relationships, what about adolescent sibling conflict? According to researchers such as Campione-Barr and Smetana (2010), many of the conflicts that occur among adolescent siblings relate to issues that stem from living together in the same household, such as needing to share possessions or clarifying ownership of property. However, we also know that adolescent siblings may often engage in forms of relational aggression—behaviors that are intended to hurt, embarrass, or humiliate another through non-physical means (Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher, 2006) and in ways that attack their relationships with others (Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning, & McHale, 2005). Stauffacher and DeHart (2005) found that siblings may use relational aggression to exclude a brother or sister from a social engagement or to attempt to damage the target child's relationship with another individual. They further found that relational aggression occurs more often among siblings than friends, even in early childhood. Updegraff, Thayer, et al. (2005) found that relational aggression among adolescent siblings was related to decreased sibling intimacy and increased negativity; interestingly, this was true for both female and male adolescents. Furthermore, the quality of parent-adolescent

relationships moderated this effect, as lower levels of relational aggression were predicted by adolescents' perceptions of higher levels of parental warmth and acceptance, highlighting the importance of considering context. Finally, it is important to recognize that in some families, animosity among siblings may exceed the scope of squabbles and relational aggression and enter the realm of violent or abusive behaviors. Although this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is critical for families, educators, and practitioners to be alert to instances in which sibling conflict is intense, frequent, and involves threatening or dangerous acts or sexual behaviors (Caffaro, 2013; Wiehe, 1997).

## THE JOYS AND TRIBULATIONS OF RAISING SIBLINGS

Siblings do not raise themselves and parents, of course, play a predominant role in socializing children and cultivating their ability to interact with one another in ways that are adaptive, not only for each child's individual development but for the family as a whole. In the process, parents are personally affected in ways that may impact their development as individuals and their relationships with partners and extended family members. Parenting can be an emotional enterprise (Dix, 1991). Gratification may come as children learn to interact positively with one another and rely on one another for support. Alternately, sibling strife can evoke an entirely different set of emotions in parents, and how these emotions are regulated and managed can have considerable impact on their own and their children's development. This section reviews research on the joys and challenges of raising multiple children as well as the implications of parents' emotional experiences for sibling relationship quality.

### Transition to Parenting Multiple Children

Following family systems theory, families must reorient and reorganize themselves whenever a new member is added to the existing system (Minuchin, 1974). The birth of a second, or subsequent, child prompts families to adapt to the new member, which involves, among many other things, changes in established roles, responsibilities, and patterns of

interactions (Stewart, 1990). These changes may be simultaneously experienced by parents as both positive and stressful. Although the bulk of research has focused on the adjustment to the birth of the first child (see Chapter 26, this volume, for a review), a few studies have examined the stresses and joys parents experience when they have a second or subsequent child. For instance, compared with first-time mothers, second-time mothers experience higher levels of psychological stress and lower levels of well-being (Wilkinson, 1995); however, at the same time, second-time mothers reported the addition of a second child to be a positive experience (O'Reilly, 2005).

Similar to the birth of a firstborn child, the birth of a second or subsequent child may alter the quality of the marital relationship, which may add to parental stress during this transition. Volling, Oh, Gonzalez, Kuo, and Yu (2015) found that, as individuals, mothers and fathers tended to show different patterns of change in marital quality across the transition to a second child, with some couples exhibiting greater discrepancies in marital satisfaction than others. Whereas parental depression and neuroticism put couples at risk for greater discrepancies and poorer marital quality over the course of the transition, marital communication and social support were associated with enhanced marital quality. It is unclear, however, whether these patterns of adjustment are unique to the transition with the second child. A closer examination of the differences and similarities between parents' emotional adjustment to the birth of a firstborn versus a second-born child is needed to enhance our understanding of the positive aspects and challenges associated with the transition from rearing singletons to raising multiple children.

### **Parents' Emotional Responses and Sibling Agonism**

One of the challenges that parents face when raising siblings is managing and guiding their children's interactions with one another. As discussed above, sibling conflict is the most frequent type of conflict in families (Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 2006) and agonistic sibling interactions are likely to be significant stressors for parents (Stewart, 1990).

It is increasingly clear that parents' negative emotions are associated with poorer sibling relationship

quality. Patterson (1982) observed that parents who are overwhelmed by their own negative emotions were more likely to have children who had difficulty getting along. Mothers who tend to express high levels of negative emotions in the family were more likely to have children who engaged in more hostile interactions with one another (Stocker, Ahmed, & Stall, 1997). Additionally, Jenkins, Rasbash, Leckie, Gass, and Dunn (2012) found that mothers' depression, hostility, and negativity towards their children were associated with higher levels of sibling agonism, including hostility, and lower levels of sibling affection 2 years later. Less is known about the correlates of fathers' negative emotions.

How do parents' negative emotions influence sibling relationship quality? We turn to three conceptual frameworks that might explain possible mechanisms for this association. First, the experience of negative emotions can suppress parents' ability to respond to children supportively (Dix, 1991). For example, children who exhibit high levels of negative emotionality tend to have parents who respond less supportively (Bates, Schermerhorn, & Petersen, 2012). Parents who feel overwhelmed and upset about their children's conflicts with each other may be less able to guide their children's interactions in child-centered ways that prior research has found to be beneficial (Ravindran et al., 2015; Siddiqui & Ross, 2004). Second, in accordance with social learning theory, parents who feel distressed may not model adaptive strategies for problem-solving and emotion regulation, thereby reducing opportunities for children to learn these adaptive strategies. Third, parents' negative emotions may also affect sibling relationships via emotional contagion (the transmission of emotions from one person to another; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994). Parents who exhibit negative emotions in the home may provide more opportunities for their children to imitate their negative emotional expressions, which can, in turn, depress the quality of sibling relationships.

It is important to note that current empirical evidence does not help to determine which of these three conceptual frameworks best explains associations between parents' negative emotions and sibling relationship quality, nor help ascertain the direction of these effects. It is likely that the association between

parents' negative emotions and children's sibling relationship quality is bidirectional. Parents might negatively influence sibling relationship quality by expressing negative emotions in the home, modeling maladaptive strategies for emotion regulation and failing to support their children effectively during sibling conflicts. Agonistic sibling interactions may, in turn, contribute to an increase in parent negative emotions, setting a coercive cycle in motion (Patterson, 1986). More research is needed to better understand the exact mechanisms by which parents' negative emotions contribute to variations in sibling relationship quality.

### **Parents' Emotional Experiences and Sibling Warmth**

If sibling conflict is stressful for parents, one would assume that sibling warmth and other positive interactions between children will precipitate parents to feel joy and happiness. Positive emotions play an important role in emotional health and resiliency (Fredrickson, 2001) and may therefore be associated with sensitive and responsive parenting behaviors. Previous research has indeed established links between parents' expression of positive emotions and sibling warmth in both preschool and school-aged siblings (Gamble & Yu, 2014). In a naturalistic study of spontaneous expressions of positive emotions in family life, Bai, Repetti, and Sperling (2016) observed that children were more likely to sustain their expressions of positive affect when mothers, fathers, and siblings mutually displayed positive emotions, touched them, or joined them in a leisure activity. Bai et al. pointed out that the associations between parents' positive emotions and sibling warmth are likely bidirectional; whereas children may imitate parents' positive affect and direct it to their sibling relationships, parents are also more likely to sustain their expressions of positive emotions when their children support and mirror those emotions.

### **EVIDENCE-BASED PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES**

From the research summarized thus far, it is evident that parents' emotional experiences help

to shape the quality of children's sibling relationships and so have important implications for practice. Several interventions exist to help parents successfully adjust to the demands of transitioning to parenthood (e.g., Doss, Cicila, Hsueh, Morrison, & Carhart, 2014; Feinberg & Kan, 2008), but few have been explicitly designed to help family systems reorganize and adapt to the many changes and challenges that occur with the addition of a subsequent child. Family psychologists and other practitioners working with couples expecting their second child should proactively address the unique challenges that will arise, such as changes in the marital relationship, learning to parent multiple children who each have unique needs, and the emotion-laden work of helping children establish a positive relationship with each other. Specifically, practitioners can help parents better regulate emotions in the context of sibling agonism by reframing mild forms of conflict as normative and potentially beneficial for children to learn certain competencies, and assisting them in differentiating between normative and nonnormative types of conflict. Practitioners can work with families to prevent or mitigate children's perceptions of unfair parental differential treatment and identify instances where differential treatment might be problematic for children's adjustment. Practitioners can also help parents understand children's unique temperaments and characteristics and help them meet the unique needs of each child without compromising the quality of parent-child interaction or resorting to unfair differential treatment. Efforts could also be made to enhance factors that might be protective, such as increasing social support, problem-solving, and communication skills among siblings.

The research is also clear in demonstrating that agonistic and hostile sibling relationships are problematic for all family members; thus, effective tools must be developed for helping siblings get along. There is much value in prevention and intervention programs that are evidence-based and empirically tested. But even beyond their value in supporting good sibling relationships, the systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs offers critical opportunities for testing hypotheses and advancing theory, helping us to better understand the role of sibling relationships in promoting resilient families.

A key objective of this chapter is to examine whether improvements in sibling relationships result in better functioning for individuals, parents, and for families as a whole—and, if so, whether this is true across the life course. Longitudinal studies have suggested that, without intervention, the quality of sibling interactions remain relatively stable over time with the percent of positive interaction observed at one time point strongly predicting the percent positive interaction at subsequent intervals (Kramer & Kowal, 2005). This suggests that relationships that begin on a positive note tend to continue in this manner, whereas those relationships that begin with a significant amount of agonism also tend to persist in this manner. However, this does not mean that the ultimate quality of sibling relationships is determined in early childhood. For example, the correlation between observed sibling interaction when second-born children were 4 and 13 years of age was .69,  $p < .05$  (Kramer & Kowal, 2005), which suggests that while there is significant continuity in children's sibling relationship quality over time, there is also likelihood of moderate change. Children's sibling relationships have been shown to improve when parents increase their use of adaptive parenting strategies (Siddiqui & Ross, 2004), and when families participate in a carefully designed prevention or intervention program (Feinberg, Sakuma, Hostetler, & McHale, 2013; Kennedy & Kramer, 2008) or family therapy (Caspi, 2012). We describe several of these next.

### Parent Training

Training parents to better manage children's sibling relationships can produce positive outcomes. For example, Siddiqui and Ross (2004) taught mothers how to use a set of mediation strategies to help their children resolve sibling conflicts. This was effective in promoting children's acquisition of conflict management skills. However, the absence of conflict does not mean that children will miraculously find ways to engage positively with one another. In fact, there is reason to believe that children may disengage from one another if positive engagement is not experienced as rewarding (Leitenberg, Burchard, Burchard, Fuller, & Lysaght, 1977). Therefore, it is also important to devote attention to building prosocial sibling behaviors while working to reduce conflict.

### Siblings Are Special

The Siblings Are Special program (SAS; Feinberg, Sakuma, et al., 2013; Feinberg, Solmeyer, et al., 2013) is targeted at families with a fifth-grade student and at least one younger sibling in the second to fourth grade. The program is delivered as an afterschool program, offered in 12 weekly sessions with three additional family-night sessions. A key motivation for developing SAS was to reduce sibling negativity and coercion using a multifaceted approach geared towards both enhancing sibling relationship quality and promoting individual well-being (e.g., lower levels of depression, poor academic achievement, deviant peer relationships, substance abuse, other risky behaviors). SAS targets a set of sibling relationship skills, which includes emotion understanding, self-control, perspective-taking, social problem-solving, conflict resolution, and fair play skills, adapted from the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) socio-emotional curriculum (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995) and the Fast Track social skills training curriculum (Bierman, Greenberg, & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1996). In addition, the program focuses on cognitions regarding sibling relationships, including children's attributions and goals in the sibling relationship and their attitudes and norms around sibling and family roles (Feinberg, Sakuma, et al., 2013). Finally, SAS supports parental management of the sibling relationship, including brief training in how to mediate the conflicts that occur among siblings and the support of sibling activities and joint sibling decision making. Preliminary results have been promising with very strong treatment retention rates and reports of improved sibling relationships.

### Fun With Sisters and Brothers Programs

Preventive intervention programs, such as the Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program (Kramer & Radey, 1997) for preschoolers with an infant and toddler aged sibling, and the More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program (MFWSB; Kennedy & Kramer, 2008) for siblings aged 4 to 8 years, intentionally build on socialization processes that promote the

development of social and emotional understanding. Small groups of sibling dyads are taught a set of social and emotional competencies that have been identified in previous research as contributing to prosocial sibling relationship quality, including learning how to initiate play, how to decline invitations to play in ways that do not lead to conflicts or hurt feelings, perspective-taking, emotional identification and emotional regulation, and conflict management. Children are taught a method of instructional self-talk, self-control, and emotion regulation that they can use in potentially problematic sibling encounters so they can avoid impulsive responding, think explicitly about what their goals are in the particular social situation and how they might achieve those goals, respond calmly in emotionally charged situations, and communicate with their sibling about their individual perspectives and needs. Attention is also devoted to helping children appreciate that their sibling may have emotional experiences through the course of their interactions that fundamentally differ from their own. These social and emotional competencies are taught over the course of five sessions using a variety of strategies, including direct instruction, modeling, role plays, conflict management exercises, parent training, and home-based feedback and coaching sessions. Because siblings participate in MFWSB together, they have a direct opportunity to learn, practice, and receive coaching and feedback on the social and emotional competencies taught in the program. A series of investigations have revealed that MFWSB is linked with improvements in emotion regulation (Kennedy & Kramer, 2008), perspective-taking (Kramer, Schell, & Kramer, 2010), and conflict management (Kramer & Kennedy, 2013), that are in turn linked with more positive sibling interactions. Interestingly, improvements in children's emotion regulation through MFWSB was also associated with improvements in parents' emotion regulation (Ravindran et al., 2015).

### Psychotherapy

Interestingly, few psychotherapy approaches have been explicitly designed to treat sibling issues, such as aggression. Milevsky (2016) provided an

excellent review of how traditional individual and family therapies may be adapted to address sibling issues, either by inviting siblings to participate or by adjusting therapeutic techniques to focus on sibling-related issues.

In one of the few therapeutic models that has been expressly designed to address sibling issues, Caspi (2012) has developed the Task-Centered Sibling Aggression treatment model that integrates structural family therapy, behavioral strategies, and a "task-centered" (Reid, 1992) approach in which sibling strife is addressed using a problem-solving method. In this evidence-based therapeutic technique, Caspi's goal is to reduce aggression while building positive sibling relationships. Following a process of sibling education in which he helps families understand some of the basic family dynamics that inadvertently support sibling aggression (see Bullock & Dishion, 2002; Patterson, 1986) and the treatment process, Caspi's therapeutic model involves devising and enacting "tasks" that are intended to interrupt dysfunctional patterns and solve the problems the family has identified as most critical. To promote prosocial sibling behaviors, Caspi draws on the set of essential competencies that Kramer (2010) identified as central for establishing prosocial sibling relationships, which includes positive engagement, cohesion, shared experiences that build support, social and emotional understanding, emotion regulation, behavioral control, the formation of positive or neutral attributions about sibling's intent, conflict management and problem-solving, and assessing whether parental differential treatment practices are negatively impacting children. To address the presenting problems of participating families, therapists devise tasks that require parents to respond to sibling strife in ways that differ dramatically from their past practices; for example, by asking them to praise their children when they show support for one another rather than for individual achievements (which may be perceived by the children as evaluative comparisons). Designed on the basis of solid research, the Task-Centered Sibling Aggression model has also been formulated to be amenable to empirical evaluation; pilot testing has supported the value of the model for reducing sibling fights (Caspi, 2008).

## CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on the collection of research reviewed in this chapter, we argue that positive sibling relationships can contribute to enhanced well-being of individuals, siblings, and families as a whole, across the life course. Starting with the arrival of a second child and ending with the death of one of those siblings, these dynamic relationships are the longest relationships that most people will ever experience. And throughout the life course, siblings play key roles in advancing individuals' development of social understanding (e.g., Dunn, 2014) and the ability to negotiate and problem solve when conflicts arise (e.g., Siddiqui & Ross, 2004), and provide advice and support as they go about their everyday lives (Hollifield & Conger, 2015; Milevsky, 2005). In addition, sibling relationships can provide a supportive context for children and adolescents coping with a variety of family stressors, including the loss of access to a parent through divorce or foster care, economic hardship, and other events. Furthermore, pronounced unmanaged conflict and animosity among siblings have the potential to counteract the positive effects of sibling support, but it is possible to help siblings increase positivity in their interactions. Across all of these studies, the findings illustrate the importance of examining sibling relationship dynamics within the context of other family interactions as well as the broader ecological contexts in which individuals and families operate (e.g., Mota & Matos, 2015; Richardson & Yates, 2014).

Despite the clear evidence that sibling relationships are formative ones across the life course, their potential role for advancing the well-being of individuals and families has been largely overlooked (Kramer & Bank, 2005). Thus, we challenge researchers, educators, practitioners, and policy-makers as they design their studies, programs, and policies to acknowledge, and hopefully harness, the contributions that siblings make in one another's development in their everyday lives. Now that the field of family psychology sees how many questions regarding the health and well-being of individuals can be better understood by including information about siblings and their relationships throughout the life course, researchers and practitioners must be encouraged to continue this progress. Even studies

of psychological constructs that have traditionally been considered to be individual in nature could be informed by attending to sibling effects. For example, the inclusion of siblings in studies on children's language acquisition has resulted in a much more nuanced picture of how children learn to communicate (Dunn & Shatz, 1989). Similarly, the inclusion of siblings in intervention programs aimed at reducing child behavior problems (e.g., Stormshak, Bullock, & Falkenstein, 2009) or when making decisions about foster care placements (Linares, Li, Shrout, Brody, & Pettit, 2007) has expanded our understanding of these processes.

Additional longitudinal studies of siblings and their relationships are needed to help researchers and practitioners more fully determine the antecedents and consequences of sibling relationships dynamics and their association with individual outcomes. We advocate for greater use of experimental interventions, such as those randomized control designs used in the studies of SAS (Feinberg, Sakuma, et al., 2013) and MFWSB (Ravindran et al., 2015), which will enable researchers to advance theory by more clearly ascertaining the factors that drive improvements in sibling relationships.

Future work on sibling relationships should include all children in families, including biological siblings, stepsiblings, half siblings, and adopted siblings. The majority of research on sibling relationships has been focused on characteristics and behaviors of two children close in age with the same biological parents (see Kramer & Bank, 2005), sidestepping the complexities of genetic relatedness and its association with sibling/parent/stepparent dynamics. Research on siblings within different family structures would advance our understanding of how these relationships tend to be similar and different. Looking within families, we could also learn how these separate but interlocking subsystems of siblings contribute to, and are affected by, the well-being of other family members and family functioning as a whole.

In conclusion, high quality sibling relationships offer many benefits to individuals throughout their lives. To fully capitalize on these benefits, and to help more individuals experience the benefits of positive sibling relationships, we require further knowledge

of how these relationships work. Researchers and clinicians interested in understanding the impact of sibling relationships across the life course must broaden their efforts to examine sibling roles and relationships across time, across family types, and across cultures and socioeconomic factors to better harness the significance of these dynamic, lifelong relationships. The development of effective educational, prevention, and intervention initiatives depend upon extending this knowledge base.

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