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Learning Emotional Understanding and Emotion Regulation Through Sibling Interaction

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Research Findings: Young children's relationships with their sisters and brothers offer unique and important opportunities for learning about emotions and developing emotional understanding. Through a critical analysis, this article examines sibling interaction in 3 different but normative contexts (conflict/conflict management, play, and sibling–parent interaction) in order to elucidate the processes by which emotional understanding and emotion regulation develop. The results of recent research and theoretical frameworks are used to explore the ways in which sibling relationships are effective contexts for the development of children's emotional understanding, including identifying emotions, decoding the emotions of others, and anticipating the emotional responses of others in particular situations; emotion regulation; and the use of emotional understanding to build (or impede) relationships and affect the behaviors of others. *Practice or Policy:* Implications from the current analysis include methods for harnessing the potential of children's growth in emotional understanding through their encounters with siblings to affect positive outcomes for child development.

Sibling relationships are natural contexts for learning about the world of emotion. As involuntary and permanent relationships—children have absolutely no choice in selecting their sisters and brothers and cannot end these relationships even if they wanted to—sibling relationships are resistant to dissolution in the face of conflict (as friendships are), thereby making them relatively safe and convenient contexts for learning about diverse emotional experiences. As Dunn (2007), as well as many other researchers, observed, sibling interactions offer ample opportunities for learning how to identify, express, and regulate a wide array of emotions. Despite the fact that sibling relationships are integral to family process, the examination of these relationships is relatively rare, especially compared to the study of parent–child and marital relationships (McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). This article draws from recent research and theoretical contributions to critically analyze the ways in which sibling relationships may be effective contexts for

- developing an emotion vocabulary and expanding one's repertoire of emotional experiences, including identifying and expressing emotions, decoding the emotions of others, and anticipating the emotional responses of others in particular situations;
- learning about subtle or blended emotions and discriminating between emotions that are often confused;

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- understanding the emotional experiences of others as potentially distinct from one's own and learning to consider the disparate emotions of others as valid; and
- learning to control and regulate one's expression of emotions.

This article addresses siblings' development of emotional understanding through an exploration of the normative contexts in which such learning generally takes place, particularly during (a) conflict (e.g., exploring one's ideas and preferences in relation to those of siblings, negotiating differences in opinions), (b) positive sibling engagement (e.g., having fun; experiencing solidarity, support, enjoyment, companionship), and (c) managing relationships with parents (e.g., forming alliances with and against parents, engaging in shared deviance, responding to parental differential treatment). The processes by which children learn about emotions from their siblings are addressed by drawing from the conceptual frameworks of social learning theory and family systems theory.

Finally, the practical implications of this line of research are discussed. Research is presented to demonstrate that siblings can be taught social and emotional competencies that have value for sibling relationship quality (Feinberg, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012; Kramer, 2010; Siddiqui & Ross, 2004). Work by Jon Caspi (2011) suggests that because siblings are so knowledgeable about one another's emotional experiences, they may be effective coaches who can help one another react effectively in emotionally charged situations. Implications exist for taking advantage of the development of emotional understanding within sibling relationships to improve children's relationships with peers, teachers, and parents.

DEFINING EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING

According to LaBounty, Wellman, Olson, Lagattuta, and Liu (2008), *emotional understanding* refers to ''the understanding of emotional expressions, internal feelings, and the antecedents and consequences of emotions in the self and in others'' (p. 758). Similarly, Howe, Aquan-Assee, Bukowski, Lehoux, and Rinaldi (2001) described emotional understanding as ''knowledge about emotions such as identifying feelings, regulating emotions appropriately, and talking about circumstances that might provoke specific internal states'' (p. 441). Affective perspective taking is considered to be a form of emotional understanding that entails perceiving the emotional state of others with respect to the situation they are in (LaBounty et al., 2008). In line with these definitions, a broad view of emotional understanding is used to guide the current analysis of how emotional understanding may be fostered in the context of sibling relationships.

Developmental Considerations

The preschool years represent a critical developmental period for emotional understanding in which children make great strides in their ability to recognize and label both fundamental (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, fright) and complex (e.g., pride, shame, embarrassment) emotions (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994; Harter & Buddin, 1987; Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). In addition to identifying and naming emotions, preschool-age children also learn and adopt many of the display rules that govern the expression of various emotions in accordance with societal expectations (Denham et al., 1994). Through their extensive cross-sectional and

longitudinal research, Pons and Harris (2005) laid out a rough developmental timeline by which emotional understanding develops: (a) by ages 4 to 5, a majority of children accurately recognize facial expressions and understand the impact of situational causes and reminders on emotions; (b) by ages 5 to 6, children begin to understand the concept of having conflicting desires and their impact on emotion, as well as the potential for concealing emotions; and (c) by ages 11 to 12, children understand how to regulate their emotions and have a stronger capacity to understand mixed or conflicting emotions. Pons and Harris underscored that individual differences are pronounced and that the developmental sequence underlying emotional understanding may best be understood in natural contexts, such as during the course of family interaction.

The Complementary Roles of Parents and Siblings

Parents have long been viewed as key agents for supporting children's development of emotional understanding, particularly as they serve as models of emotional expressivity and engage in conversations with their children about emotions and the internal states of others (Dunn, Brown, & Beardsall, 1989; N. Eisenberg et al., 2003). Through interactions with parents, children learn about the role of emotions in interpersonal relationships, including how to manage or regulate intense emotions, which is fundamental for more mature forms of socioemotional functioning (Eisenberg et al., 2003). Children's use of internal state language with parents has been used as a marker of emotional understanding (Bretherton, Fritz, Zahn-Waxler, & Ridgeway, 1986; Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987) and as a reflection of children's understanding of their social worlds and relationships (Dunn et al., 1989; Harris, 1994).

Along with parents, siblings play a formative role in the development of children's emotional understanding. During the significant amount of time that siblings spend together (McHale et al., 2012), they often discuss affective experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Howe et al., 2001) as well as direct internal state language to one another (Howe, Petrakos, & Rinaldi, 1998). As reviewed here, sibling interaction is often emotionally charged, marked by frequent expressions of anger, frustration, jealousy, pride, and happiness, among many other emotions (Kramer & Kowal, 2005). As emotional exchanges frequently occur beyond the eyes and ears of parents (Kramer & Kowal, 2005), researchers have much to learn about how siblings uniquely influence one another's emotional development and competencies in emotional understanding. Thus, an exploration of sibling influences on emotional understanding is warranted.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of longitudinal research, such as studies conducted by Dunn, McHale and Crouter, Kramer, and Volling, among others, have emphasized that sibling relationships are complex, multidimensional relationships that evolve and change over time (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2006, 2007; Kramer & Gottman, 1992; Kramer & Kowal, 2005; Volling, 2012). Given this complexity, one cannot expect a single theoretical perspective to account for the many diverse facets of social and emotional experience that are commonly observed in sibling interactions (Whiteman, McHale, & Soli, 2011). Nonetheless, two theoretical frameworks have considerable bearing on the ways in which children learn components of

emotional understanding through their relationships with siblings: social learning theory and family systems theory.

According to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), individuals learn a great deal about their social worlds by observing and imitating the behaviors of others. The future performance of these imitative behaviors is shaped by a variety of factors, including antecedent and consequent events, expectancies, and perceptions of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Antecedent events, which include the cues that precede the target behavior and the context in which it is performed, set the occasion for the future enactment of the behavior. Consequent events, such as whether a behavior is rewarded, punished, or ignored, affect the future enactment of target behaviors as children develop expectancies about what is likely to occur if they enact these behaviors in particular ways in specific contexts. In addition, children's perceptions of self-efficacy—the degree to which they believe they can successfully enact the target behavior—also affect its future occurrence.

According to Bandura (1977), emotional behaviors are learned in the same ways that other behaviors are. Thus, through observational learning, children acquire information about emotions by observing how others express and describe feelings and by observing the consequences that occur as a result of these displays. Children are most likely to imitate when models are perceived as powerful or high in status, are attractive and friendly, and are perceived as similar to themselves. Siblings fit this bill beautifully and serve as models through their roles as playmates, antagonists, teachers, and caregivers (Whiteman et al., 2011). As I explore here, interactions with siblings enable children to learn a great deal about how to identify and label specific feelings, how and under which circumstances they may appropriately display these feelings, and how to detect these feelings in others.

Family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974) recognizes the importance of sibling relationships as key components, or subsystems, of the larger family system. According to this theory, families are complex, multifaceted, dynamic organisms that consist of a number of interdependent subsystems (e.g., marital, parent–child, grandparent–child, sibling). Although parents are viewed as the architects of the family who establish rules to govern behavior and set boundaries for relationships within and across generational lines, siblings are considered to be important actors who are integral to a variety of family functions. For example, in times of stress and change, siblings can be primary sources of support and assistance to one another, especially when parents are preoccupied with externally driven stressors, such as unemployment. Through the formation of alliances, siblings can be effective stimulants of change in other family subsystems, for example, as they work together to pressure a parent to stop drinking or cajole her to set a later curfew. Family systems therapies, such as those developed by Bateson, Jackson, Haley, McGoldrick, Watzlawick, and Weakland, evolved from family systems theory and help families adapt to stressors by facilitating the restructuring and recalibration of family functioning through the examination and realignment of family relationships, communication patterns, rules, boundaries, and other essential operations (Ramage & Shipp, 2009).

Although historically family systems theory emphasized structural and organizational features of family functioning rather than emotional well-being per se, attention to the importance of emotion and emotional understanding within family systems therapy came from the work of Lee Greenberg on emotion-focused therapy (Greenberg, 2002) and that of his protégé, Sue Johnson, who developed emotion-focused couples (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988) and family (Johnson & Lee, 2000) therapy. In these frameworks, emotion is viewed as both the target and mechanism

for change within relational contexts. According to Greenberg (2010), ''Change occurs by helping people make sense of their emotions through awareness, expression, regulation, reflection, transformation, and corrective experience of emotion in the context of an empathically attuned relationship that facilitates these processes'' (p. 34).

Although emotion-focused family therapy clearly invites an examination of the role of siblings in the emotional life of the family, including the development of emotional understanding, to date scant attention has been paid to this critical dimension of family well-being (Johnson & Lee, 2000). Even articles that focus on children in emotion-focused family therapy do not fully exploit the potential of sibling relationships to address mental health and behavioral problems experienced by family members (Palmer & Efron, 2007). This is a significant limitation because siblings are very knowledgeable about their sisters' and brothers' tendency to react in particular ways in stressful situations and can be effective agents of change (Kahn & Lewis, 1988). As discussed here, family systems theory can provide an immensely valuable framework by which experts may elucidate and enhance siblings' emotional understanding.

In summary, the notion that siblings help shape the development of one another's capacity for emotional understanding is both intriguing and consistent with social learning and family systems theories, but it is one that has not yet been subject to thorough investigation (Kramer & Conger, 2009). In the following sections, family systems and social learning frameworks are used to explore the ways in which children's daily encounters with siblings provide a unique window into their development of emotional understanding.

LINKS BETWEEN EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING AND SIBLING RELATIONSHIP QUALITY

As I begin this analysis, it is important to demonstrate that emotional understanding is indeed linked with the quality of children's sibling relationships—that is, that sibling relationships that are more positive in nature, such as those that evidence greater warmth and closeness, are also characterized by higher levels of emotional understanding. There does appear to be substantial evidence to support this association. Stocker, Burwell, and Briggs (2002) found that children who are better able to understand and discuss their own and their siblings' internal states are more likely to interact prosocially. Similarly, Howe et al. (1998) reported that children who used more internal state language also engaged in less sibling conflict. Furthermore, Volling, McElwain, and Miller (2002) found that preschool-age older siblings who scored higher on their assessment of emotional understanding were less likely to demonstrate negative emotions and failure to regulate behavior in a ''social triangle''—a context designed to elicit jealousy in which children observe their younger siblings receiving unilateral attention from their mothers.

Empathy has also been reported more frequently among adolescent siblings who indicate greater warmth and less conflict in their relationship (Lam, Solmeyer, & McHale, 2012). More specifically, Howe et al. (2001) demonstrated that siblings in middle childhood/early adolescence who viewed their relationship as high in warmth were more likely to report disclosing intimate information to their sibling and feeling positive about doing so. When faced with a set of hypothetical situations portraying various relationship issues, children offered more instrumental, realistic, and practical courses of action when they also reported having a warm sibling relationship; having a female sibling was a bonus on this measure of emotional understanding.

Although the degree of emotional understanding (especially in terms of children's knowledge of the reciprocal nature of relationships and the provisions of instrumental solutions in hypothetical situations) was observed to be greater when children perceived their sibling relationship to be warmer, and greater self-disclosure occurred when siblings felt closer to one another, emotional understanding per se was not linked with more self-disclosure. According to Howe et al. (2001), ''A warm relationship may afford children greater insight and understanding of others' internal states and interpersonal dilemmas, thus enabling the target sisters to identify specific instrumental problem-solving solutions'' (p. 452).

Taken together, these findings support the notion that linkages exist between emotional understanding and warm, prosocial sibling relationships. Because of the paucity of longitudinal studies, it is not yet possible to discern whether emotional understanding is a precipitant or a consequence of positive sibling relationships. Most likely, both are true and the associations are bidirectional. Positive sibling engagement may offer fertile ground for learning and practicing new forms of emotional understanding, and, in accordance with this, the enactment of more sensitive behaviors via enhanced emotional understanding may make sibling interaction more pleasurable, thereby increasing sibling warmth and strengthening sibling bonds. Researchers are encouraged to test for bidirectional effects in future studies.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Much research on children's development of emotional understanding has been experimental in nature, with investigators utilizing standardized tasks and/or experimental manipulations to examine children's responses to carefully crafted emotion-eliciting situations or hypothetical situations. Common dependent measures have included correctly detecting the emotional experiences of an actor in a standard story (e.g., Pons & Harris, 2005), or as portrayed by puppets in emotion-eliciting scenarios (e.g., Denham, 1986), or correctly detecting the degree to which children's verbal explanations of events refer to the internal states of others (e.g., Howe et al., 1998). Some notable exceptions include studies that have analyzed family conversation in natural family contexts, such as reading a picture book together, for evidence of talk that spontaneously referred to feelings and the internal states of self and others (e.g., Howe, Rinaldi, & Recchia, 2010). Decades ago, Ekman and Oster (1979) raised the concern that more research is done using cognitive tasks that tap children's knowledge of emotion expression rather than directly measuring spontaneous emotion expressions, and unfortunately this is still the case today. Although there is clear merit in controlled experimental investigations, very little research has capitalized on the frequent interactions that occur among siblings, under ordinary circumstances, in natural contexts that call for, and perhaps propel, emotional understanding. This is a critical limitation of the research to date. One objective of the current analysis is to encourage researchers to take greater advantage of the home and other typical contexts for family interaction as natural laboratories in which the development of emotional understanding can be systematically observed and measured repeatedly over time.

The following sections examine the ways in which siblings may shape one another's emotional understanding. They begin with an examination of how emotional understanding may be fostered in the context of sibling conflict and then progress to contexts involving positive sibling engagement.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH SIBLING CONFLICT

The occurrence of mutual opposition among siblings provides a unique window into the emergence of emotional understanding in ways that may differ from what children learn by interacting with parents (Tucker & Updegraff, 2009). Kramer and Gottman (1992) argued that because they are not as predisposed as parents and other adults to deciphering and addressing one another's personal needs and interests, young children may find their interactions with siblings to be quite challenging. Conflict occurs frequently among young siblings: 2- to 4-year-olds have been reported to experience 7.65 disputes per hour, with an average length of 10.69 sequential moves or interactions per dispute (Perlman & Ross, 2005). Kramer, Perozynski, and Chung (1999) timed the conflicts occurring between 3- and 9-year-old siblings and learned that each lasted approximately 45 s on average. Thus, a significant portion of the time siblings spend together involves mutual opposition.

Observational research indicates that young siblings experience disappointment, frustration, anger, and sadness at frequencies that exceed their experiences with family interaction when mothers are present (Kramer & Gottman, 1992). And whereas parents may work to curtail children's emotional distress through soothing words or actions, or even through discipline, siblings are less likely to respond in these ways, thereby increasing the chances that the exchange of negative affect will escalate and coercive chains of sibling interaction will ensue (Patterson, 1984). It should be noted that parent–child conflict is also a frequent event, with some studies estimating rates as high as once per minute (Huang, Teti, Caughy, Feldstein, & Genevro, 2007). Although constructive forms of parent–child conflict have been shown to be formative for children's development and their acquisition of emotional understanding (Laible & Thompson, 2002), I focus here on the significance of sibling conflict as a distinct context in which emotional understanding may develop.

Repeated bouts of frustration, disappointment, anger, and sadness that are inherent in many forms of sibling conflict hold important implications for development, as they have the potential to help children expand their emotion vocabulary. For example, through sibling conflict, children experience a range of emotions that may simply not occur with frequency in other relationships (e.g., jealousy, fury). Through a process of social learning, children observe the emotional displays of their siblings, which may lead them to imitate these reactions when they are faced with a similar provocation (unless, of course, they also observe the punishment of these expressions). Thus, siblings are provided with ongoing opportunities not only to expand their vocabulary of words of expressed emotions (e.g., identify and learn the names of subtle emotions like embarrassment and confusion, or gain experience with blended emotions like pride mixed with envy) but to also recognize, decode, and interpret the emotions of others. Through conversations with siblings that involve the exploration of feeling states, children may learn to discriminate between emotions that are often confused (e.g., hate vs. frustration, as when a child explains, ''I don't hate you, I'm just upset and frustrated that you got to play ball with Dad and I didn't''). Through repeated experiences like these, siblings may learn to anticipate the emotional responses others will display in particular situations and to formulate responses, all of which draw upon emotion regulation and self-control capacities in varying degrees (Dunn, 2007). With increasing experience with sibling strife, even young children may expand their skills in communicating about feeling states, using logic and communication to reason, negotiate, make deals, cajole, trick, deceive, and take advantage of the other in the service of meeting their personal goals and objectives (Dunn, 1988). Although lacking in congeniality, these forms of sibling opposition

and acts of self-interest reflect rather sophisticated forms of emotional understanding and social-cognitive abilities. The development of emotional understanding in the context of sibling relationships is not always pretty, as children can learn maladaptive as well as adaptive patterns of emotional understanding and responding.

Conflict among siblings is not always expressed directly through words or behaviors that reflect mutual opposition. For example, some sibling fights begin with no obvious provocation—at least from the perspective of parents or objective observers (Kramer et al., 1999). Siblings often use forms of nonverbal communication, such as eye contact and body language, to upset a sibling: for example, ''Mom, she's giving me that look again'' or ''Dad, he touched my carseat'' (Kramer et al., 1999). These offenses are described by children as intentional acts directed by their siblings to exercise power and control or simply to create a negative emotional experience (Prochaska & Prochaska, 1985). Although touching one's seat or glancing at a sibling may not by themselves appear to constitute aggressive provocations, they may function as such for siblings who are sensitive to, and perhaps on guard against, personal attacks and slights. Following social learning theory, these remarks may reflect a growing ability to detect, label, and give meaning to behaviors that have emotional significance—key aspects of a growing emotion vocabulary. For example, in complaining to a parent about a sibling's look, the child may be correctly detecting the sibling's feeling of contempt—even when not a single word related to contempt, or even mild disapproval, has been uttered. The recognition and decoding of facial expressions, such as rolls of the eye or lip curls, is an emerging developmental achievement (Ekman & Oster, 1979). In addition, the look might have been an antecedent event for disdain and anger in previous interactions and may be a reliable predictor of future negative exchanges.

In the following sections, the development of emotional understanding is further examined with respect to four specific contexts associated with conflict: relational aggression, manipulation, the process of conflict management, and emotion regulation during conflict. As discussed here, each context sets the occasion for learning to identify, label, express, and regulate emotions.

Relational Aggression

Conflict among siblings is not always overt in nature, and even young children are adept at finding subtle ways to oppose or hurt one another (Stauffacher & DeHart, 2005). One covert form of conflict that occurs commonly among siblings is relational aggression, in which children hurt, embarrass, or humiliate another through nonphysical means and in ways that attack their relationships with others, such as parents, friends, neighbors, or teachers (Ostrov, Crick, & Stauffacher, 2006; Updegraff, Thayer, Whiteman, Denning, & McHale, 2005). Stauffacher and DeHart (2005) drew upon previous research on relational aggression in peer contexts to establish an operational definition of relational aggression from which they created an observational coding system to assess sibling relational aggression:

> Any verbal or nonverbal behaviors that (a) excluded or ignored the partner . . . , (b) threatened to exclude or ignore the partner . . . , (c) intentionally embarrassed or humiliated the partner in front of others . . . , (d) tried to damage the relationship the partner has with a third partner . . . , (e) threatened to damage the relationship the partner has with a third party . . . , and (f) attacked or insulted the partner's relationship with a target . . . . (p. 192)

As implied in this definition, rather sophisticated levels of emotional understanding are needed in order to perform relational aggression. That is, a child must have a pretty accurate understanding of a sibling's emotional state, perhaps in terms of his or her interest in pursuing and maintaining particular social relationships, in order to successfully use this information in an aggressive fashion. The fact that children as young as 2 years of age were observed by Stauffacher and DeHart to enact relational aggression is remarkable.

Stauffacher and DeHart (2005) found that relational aggression occurs more often among siblings than friends. Whereas 4-year-olds engaged in 1.16 acts of relational aggression with their same-age friends per 20-min session, this rate was almost 3 times higher (3.29 acts) with their older and younger siblings. Overall, children directed their relationally aggressive behaviors squarely on their sibling (e.g., by indicating that they did not want to spend time with him or her), with the remaining relationally aggressive behaviors aimed at damaging the target child's relationship with an adult (usually the researcher). Stauffacher and DeHart suggested that children may experiment with some of these aversive behaviors with their siblings before implementing them with their friends, where the risk of relationship dissolution is much higher.

It is important to note that researchers do not yet know whether competencies in emotional understanding drive relational aggression or vice versa; associations between relational aggression and emotional understanding are likely bidirectional. Whereas children with greater capacities for emotional understanding may be more facile with relational aggression, children may also learn a great deal about emotions through their experiences with relational aggression. For example, by enacting or by being the target of relational aggression, children may encounter new emotions (e.g., shame, embarrassment, feelings of satisfaction associated with retribution) that they previously lacked experience with or that they had confused with more basic emotions, such as anger and sadness. Learning to identify and ultimately control and regulate these emotions in the face of relational aggression within the relatively safe context of sibling interaction may prepare children to use emotion regulation strategies with peers. This hypothesis warrants investigation, as it is also possible that because of the relative safety of the sibling relationship, children may engage in emotion regulation less often with siblings than peers.

Manipulation

Manipulation is an interesting form of relational aggression that is understudied in early childhood, perhaps because it is thought to be a complex interpersonal process out of reach for most preschool-age children. According to Simon (2010), who studied manipulation as practiced by adults, successful psychological manipulation primarily involves the manipulator (a) knowing the vulnerabilities of the victim to determine which tactics are likely to be effective, (b) being willing to cause harm to this individual, and (c) concealing aggressive intentions and behaviors. Thus, within the context of childhood sibling relationships, children must have a somewhat accurate understanding of what their sibling wants or needs—their interests, position, and predilections—to successfully manipulate him or her. This comes from knowing the sibling well—using careful observation and listening to the sibling's statements and demands, decoding his or her nonverbal cues by reading and interpreting emotional and behavioral signs, and then projecting the sibling's interests to predict what their sibling values or needs in this particular instance (perhaps by imagining what they might want or need if they were in their sibling's position). Through

careful observation, listening, and considering patterns of behavior over time, children discover the areas in which their siblings are most vulnerable. Then they must use this understanding to affect their siblings' behavior. This may lead to their experimentation with a variety of methods for best taking advantage of these weaknesses and for enacting these methods in ways that conceal their aggressive intent.

Although systematic research to understand manipulative processes among siblings is extremely rare, Dunn (1988) reported an illustrative case in which a toddler, less than 2 years of age, provoked a very strong emotional reaction in her older sister when she pretended to be her sibling's imaginary companion. Even at this tender age, this child knew exactly what to do to drive her older sibling (just a preschooler herself) berserk and could use the medium of pretend play to create such an effect.

As discussed previously with respect to relational aggression, children's experience and practice with manipulation is also likely to advance the development of emotional understanding. For example, a lack of success in manipulating a sibling to achieve a desired result may lead a child to realize that what motivates the sibling may be very different from what motivates him or her. Important lessons may be learned about how different individuals—even siblings who share a household—have distinct emotional experiences. As a result, the child may work even harder to correctly decipher the sibling's needs and goals, exploring new emotional territory through this process.

It should also be noted that because siblings are often of different ages and developmental levels, imbalances in their respective emotional competencies are likely to occur. Without clear and connected communication to clarify their meaning and intentions, these imbalances could potentially lead individual siblings to form different levels of understanding of emotion-laden events and processes, such as those involved in manipulation. For example, a 5-year-old who is excited that her older brother agreed to a bike ride together—once she makes his bed—may be oblivious to his glee at having successfully manipulated her. It may take years for this child to correctly detect her brother's ulterior motives and concealed emotions.

In short, the ability to manipulate a sibling, and to disguise one's intentions and culpability to family members, requires rather sophisticated forms of emotional understanding. These forms may include the identification and labeling of internal states and affective perspective taking as one formulates a plan that meet one's needs by taking advantage of another's interests, goals, capabilities, and vulnerabilities (Dunn, 2007). Furthermore, the feelings that emerge as children realize that they have been manipulated offer additional opportunities for learning about emotions and internal states, including formulating plausible attributions as they work to decipher the intentions and feelings of others. As Dunn (2007) pointed out, ''In the context of their interactions with their siblings—interactions of intense emotions and familiarity—much younger children show powers of anticipating the other's intentions, manipulating the other's emotions'' (p. 318). Thus, manipulation may be an understudied process in which children use their growing competence in emotional understanding to affect the behaviors of others in ways that potentially serve to build or impede relationships.

Processes of Conflict Management

An 8-year-old firstborn child participating in one of my studies expressed discontent to his mother that his 4-year-old sister was ''not a worthy opponent.'' He was disappointed that she

would not engage in serious forms of mutual opposition, as she was so motivated by her admiration for him, and innocently believed that she and her brother could be friends, that she would simply give in when he was demanding or oppositional. Apparently disgusted, this first grader told his mother that time with his sister was not time well spent.

Although conflict is not usually viewed as an enjoyable activity among siblings (despite the feelings of the 8-year-old in this observation), and is a particular source of concern among parents (Kramer & Baron, 1995), it does offer an array of opportunities for emotional understanding. Through conflict, siblings express different viewpoints, leading each to better understand their own ideas, interests, and positions, thereby advancing personal identity formation (Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Through constructive forms of sibling conflict that are characterized by relatively lower levels of negative affect, a focus on a single issue, along with explicit attempts to manage or resolve the conflict (Deutsch, 1973), children have the opportunity to practice skills in conflict management (Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988; Vandell & Bailey, 1992). These skills may include citing a rule or offering a reason for one's actions (Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981), issuing apologies and making conciliatory offers (Schleien, Ross, & Ross, 2010). negotiating outcomes (Ram & Ross, 2008; Recchia & Howe, 2009a; Ross, Ross, Stein, & Trabasso, 2006), and learning to use mediation and/or collaborative problem solving to identify a mutually satisfying result (Kramer et al., 1999; Siddiqui & Ross, 2004).

Of direct relevance to the current analysis, Dunn and Slomkowski's (1992) research showed that children's competence in perspective taking, empathy, and social understanding may be advanced by having opportunities to examine the consequences of conflict for themselves and their siblings. For example, the enactment of conflict management strategies that involve the expression of one's needs and clarification of one's position and interests help children to better understand how their behaviors negatively impact their sibling and what they might do to ameliorate these effects, both in the current circumstance and in the future. Following social learning theory, observing the consequences that are incurred when a sibling attempts to resolve a conflict can be illuminating and can affect future conflict behavior. Competence in these skills (Shantz & Hobart, 1989) as well as a sense of self-efficacy for managing conflicts (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992) may fail to develop if one never engages in conflict.

Emotion Regulation in the Context of Conflict

Whereas conflicts that create a negative emotional climate with friends can lead to the dissolution of that relationship (Gottman, 1983), the sibling relationship is generally able to sustain greater negativity. Because of the relative safety of the sibling relationship, children can practice strategies for responding effectively when they are upset or overwhelmed by emotion. For example, conflicts with siblings may enable children to become less sensitized to loud aggressive language, thereby helping them to think and behave more strategically in conflict situations (Katz et al., 1992). Thus, through the process of both engaging in conflict and working toward its resolution, sibling conflict offers repeated opportunities to learn appropriate methods of identifying, expressing, and regulating negative behaviors and emotions. However, it should also be noted that there are numerous cases in which children are unable to harness the opportunities that sibling conflict presents for adaptive functioning and instead become entrenched in negative cycles of coercive behaviors (Patterson, 1984) that do not facilitate emotional understanding or emotion regulation (Stocker et al., 2002).

Katz et al. (1992) discussed the importance of sibling conflict for enabling young children to become more tolerant and comfortable with intense forms of negative affect. For example, being the subject of someone's rage is a stressful experience for many children that may lead them to become overwhelmed by emotion, thereby becoming ineffectual in standing up for themselves. Learning to calm down, self-soothe, focus attention, and refrain from reacting impulsively when distressed during conflict are fundamental emotional competencies that are essential for more complex forms of social engagement, such as understanding what another child may think and need and using this understanding to behave in a responsive manner (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996, 1997). Gottman et al. (1996, 1997) contended that these abilities are necessary for the acquisition and demonstration of social competencies such as coordinating play and conversation, perspective taking, conflict management, and social problem solving with other children.

Parents play important roles in helping children develop successful strategies for managing conflict with siblings, both through the socialization of appropriate conflict behaviors (Recchia & Howe, 2009b) and through the strategies they model when they respond to children's conflicts (Kramer et al., 1999; Siddiqui & Ross, 2004; Smith & Ross, 2007). Recchia and Howe (2009b) found that the quality of the sibling relationship itself was an important moderator of how successful parents were in helping their children reason about solutions to their conflicts. Siblings who were reported to be higher in sibling relationship quality were also more able to formulate plans to meet their goals and develop a joint perspective—conflict management skills that require a fair degree of emotional understanding and emotion regulation. Whereas parents' constructive approaches to conflict management could foster a positive relationship among siblings, in accordance with social learning theory, it is also possible that when siblings get along well, they are more likely to adopt the (hopefully) effective conflict management skills modeled by their parents.

Given that conflict is a common feature of most sibling relationships, and that constructive forms of conflict and conflict management serve important developmental functions, conflict is not an interpersonal process that should be entirely extinguished (Kramer, 2010). Rather, as explored previously, the experience of conflict, within the relative safety of the sibling relationship, can help advance children's understanding of emotions—identifying and labeling feelings in themselves and others (including those that reflect confusing, complex, or blended emotions), the display rules that govern the expression of feelings in socially appropriate and context-relevant ways, as well as their regulation. The process of conflict management can provide a unique context for siblings to acquire and practice affective perspective taking, learning to appreciate the disparate emotions of siblings as valid.

Whereas diverse forms of conflict serve as formative contexts for learning about emotions and emotional experiences, the following section explores the ways in which prosocial sibling engagement also offers critical opportunities for the development of emotional understanding.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH POSITIVE SIBLING ENGAGEMENT

One of the most successful ways in which young siblings demonstrate positivity in their relationship is through play and companionship. Having fun; enjoying joint activities; and experiencing solidarity, support, and companionship are all interpersonal processes that occur regularly in

many childhood sibling relationships (Kramer & Gottman, 1992). Even simple exchanges among siblings, such as smiling, laughing, seeking proximity, and demonstrating physical affection, are affective experiences commonly observed in early childhood that likely set the stage for more mature forms of sibling closeness, such as emotional disclosure and the extension of help, advice, and support in middle childhood and adolescence (Kramer & Kowal, 2005). Although it is easy to take these exchanges for granted as the playful events that one naturally enjoys when growing up in a family, research suggests that routine engagement in positive activities with siblings is not trivial and is related to a host of positive developmental achievements (Dunn & Dale, 1984) and adjustment (Modry-Mandell, Gamble, & Taylor, 2007). Of direct relevance to this analysis, research on children's play, and especially shared fantasy play, reveals how forms of emotional understanding are reflected in playful sibling engagement. In the subsections here, I examine the ways in which shared fantasy play and shared experiences among siblings may also be key contexts for the development of emotional understanding.

Shared Fantasy Play

Participation in an extended bout of pretend play with another child requires a host of competencies: using clear and connected language to make requests, express one's intentions, and direct another's behavior (''Let's pretend we're taking the babies to the zoo''); coordinating activities and assigning complementary roles (''You be the mother and I'll be your newborn baby''); transforming ordinary objects into the props and setting of fantasy (''This box can be the tiger's cage''); and listening, negotiating, and adapting to changes in the play ''script'' to dramatize an interesting story (''Now, how 'bout I'll be the tiger cub and you be the veterinarian?''). According to Gottman (1983), when successful, the play is sustained and extended with children appearing to be having fun, with conflicts managed, and with adjustments to the play script being made within the frame of play whenever possible (''The vet just told me that the tiger cub has an upset stomach. We need to go get her medicine''). The emotional and social-cognitive competencies necessary for sustained shared fantasy play reflect developmental achievements traditionally thought to be restricted to children of an advanced age when tested through traditional, laboratory-based measures (Dunn, 2007; Dunn & Dale, 1984; Gottman, 1983; Youngblade & Dunn, 1995).

One of the most fascinating characteristics of shared fantasy play is that as children create and develop the script for their pretend play, they are subtly communicating not only about the actions of the characters they are enacting, which change as the plot unfolds, but also about the motivations, thoughts, and feelings of the characters they are portraying. Studies by Nina Howe, Holly Recchia, Hildy Ross, and Judy Dunn, among others, illustrate the ways in which children's pretend play contributes both to their understanding of mental states (e.g., thoughts and emotions) and to the establishment of positive sibling relationships.

Howe et al. (1998) found that children who frequently engaged in pretend play with an older sibling scored higher than their counterparts on standard assessments of internal state language that call for children to infer the mental states or perspectives of another. This is consistent with the earlier findings of Pernoff, Ruffman, and Leekam (1994) that indicated that preschool children with older siblings perform better than preschoolers without older siblings in predicting a story character's false belief, an important component of theory-of-mind assessments. In

addition, Howe, Petrakos, Rinaldi, and LeFebvre (2005) observed that the sibling interactions of kindergartners who engaged in more pretense with their sibling included more references to one another's feelings and thoughts (i.e., internal state language) and greater participation in shared meaning construction, for example through collaborative discussions that served to develop and extend play. Kindergartners who had an older sibling were more likely to engage in shared meaning construction than those who had younger siblings (Howe et al., 2005).

Furthermore, Cutting and Dunn (2006) demonstrated that fantasy play is an important context for discussions about inner states and talk about mental states and emotions among both siblings and friends—shared pretense occurred more often among siblings and friends when their relationships were more positive and affectionate. In turn, more frequent participation in shared fantasy play was linked with stronger performance on assessments of emotional understanding. It is interesting that children's behavior with a sibling did not parallel their behavior with a same-age peer, suggesting that even if children use their competencies in emotional understanding with a friend, they may not necessarily apply this knowledge in interactions with their siblings, and vice versa.

It is important to point out that the direction of the associations between emotional understanding and sibling pretend play are unclear. Although it is possible that greater facility with sibling pretend play leads to gains in emotional understanding, it is also possible that children who have developed more advanced abilities in emotional understanding are more apt to establish prosocial relationships with siblings that include higher levels of pretend play. Dunn and Dale (1984) found that the socioeomotional achievements associated with shared fantasy play are more likely to be observed among siblings who demonstrate greater positivity toward one another, perhaps because their play is more fun and rewarding. This observation is consistent with the view of Lillard et al. (2013) who through their extensive review of research on the impact of pretend play on child development contended that although pretense may be linked with higher levels of emotion regulation, for example, little evidence is currently available to support a unique, causal role. Other processes that co-occur with fantasy play (e.g., perceived relational closeness) may in fact explain the correlational results. Longitudinal research is needed to clarify the nature of the associations among shared fantasy play and emotional understanding.

Shared Experiences

Having a shared history with another child who has an intimate knowledge of the emotional life of one's particular family is an exceptional life experience (Kramer, 2011). This knowledge, which is simply not available to those outside of the immediate family, can be very valuable for helping children to understand and manage confusing and emotion-laden events, such as parent–child and interparental conflict. As Kramer (2011) stated, ''This shared understanding—or at least the potential to create a shared understanding—may be the essence and value of supportive sibling relationships'' (p. 41). Very little research has examined the ways in which these shared experiences may promote well-being across development. For example, researchers know very little about how often siblings reminisce about meaningful events and whether such exchanges foster the development of emotional understanding. This is a fertile area of investigation, as reminiscing among parents and preschool-age children has been associated with advances in emotional understanding (Laible, 2011).

Interactions in which siblings explore their shared history may not only be an opportunity to clarify the events themselves but also be an important context for refining their respective understanding of other family members' emotions, motivations, goals, and perspectives. Family systems theory predicts that through reminiscences, siblings may bring family secrets and mysteries to light and use their distinct vantage points to subject them to analysis (Kahn & Lewis, 1988). Through the process of reminiscing, siblings may further their understanding of the emotions that underlie family relationships, discovering similarities and differences in their reflections and perspectives along the way. For example, siblings may help one another correct faulty attributions of emotionally charged past events (e.g., a firstborn may explain to a younger sibling why their dad always seemed so angry, thereby relieving that sibling's sense of responsibility for causing this parent's unhappiness). A growing sense of closeness and trust may accompany these explorations of how what they have experienced together has contributed to who they are today (Kahn & Lewis, 1988).

A shared history with siblings implies a shared future. Knowing that their sibling is there accompanying them on life's journey may help children appreciate that there will always be one individual who has some understanding of what they have experienced in the past and who can help them interpret and respond effectively to emotion-laden events in the future. And, of course, the opposite is also true: Given their extensive knowledge of one another's emotionality, siblings possess the uncanny ability to drive one another berserk throughout the life course.

DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH SIBLING–PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

As discussed previously, both positive engagement in play and negative engagement in conflict offer children multiple opportunities on a daily basis to advance emotional understanding. When one considers that many of these interactions take place in the presence or close proximity of parents—who are invested in helping their young children learn to get along—one can see that parents play an important role in fostering siblings' development of emotional understanding. In the following sections, three forms of sibling–parent interactions are explored for their potential to advance emotional understanding. In line with family systems theory, these are parent–child triangulation, the formation of sibling alliances, and parental differential treatment of siblings.

Triangulation

Children often pull parents into their struggles, for example by tattling, blaming, or soliciting their support in addressing the perceived indiscretions or inappropriate behavior of their sisters and brothers (Kramer et al., 1999). In family systems terminology (Minuchin, 1974), they may aim to form an alliance with parents that, at least temporarily, triangulates or pits them against a sibling. Although little research has been conducted to investigate triangulation in the course of normative sibling–parent interactions (Ehrenberg & Regev, 2011), studies of families undergoing divorce suggest that children and adolescents who report feeling triangulated into their parents' conflicts do exhibit poorer adjustment (Grych, Raynor, & Fosco, 2004). Grych et al. (2004)

believed that the systematic study of triangulation can lead to new insights into the ways in which parent–child relationships may moderate the impact of conflict on children.

Despite the lack of empirical research on triangulation within sibling–parent relationships, researchers can extrapolate, to some degree, from observational studies of parents' responses to sibling conflict in the home environment. For example, Kramer et al. (1999) frequently observed children complaining to a parent that their sibling was infringing on their territory or property, accompanied at times with statements indicating a belief that they were justified in their aggressive reactions and entitled to restitution. Parents were therefore placed in a position of deciding whether to align with one child against another, attempt an even-handed response that addressed both children's interests, curtail complaints through separation or power assertion, and/or avoid intervening in the dispute altogether (Kramer et al., 1999). Each of these reactions may have different effects on subsequent sibling interaction and parent–child relationships (Kramer et al., 1999); for example, how a parent manages these situations gives children information about whether parents are willing to tolerate tattling or bids to triangulate siblings. The implications for emotional understanding are pronounced, as parents can help children think through the consequences of their actions on other family members, perhaps by engaging in affective perspective taking and helping them imagine what they might feel like if they were in their sibling's place. The extent to which children learn affective perspective taking and empathy through triangulating interactions such as these requires investigation. Authors such as Ehrenberg and Regev (2011) have called for additional research that tests the family systems theory conceptualization of triangulation, for example, as ''siblings in the same family could play different roles in the triangulation dynamics in ways that could harm the sibling relationship'' (p. 275).

Sibling Alliances

According to family systems theory, siblings may form alliances to use their shared strength (and powers of persuasion) to impact their parents' behaviors (Minuchin, 1974). On a relatively benign level, siblings may expect that their persuasive efforts will be more effective if they work in concert and cajole or plead with a joint voice. With advancing age, siblings are also likely to form alliances to protect and defend one of them to a parent. In addition to engaging in a variety of forms of shared deviance (''Mom's on the phone—let's go raid the cookie jar''), they may cover for one another, for example by feigning ignorance when a parent identifies a child's transgression. However, sibling alliances may grow intense, leading to shared deviance and collusion that undermine parenting (Bullock & Dishion, 2002; Patterson, 1984). Especially among teens at risk for behavioral problems, collusive conduct that centers on deviant behaviors can create a common ground among siblings that multiplies their risk for future antisocial behaviors (Bullock & Dishion, 2002).

Although parents are likely to resist shared deviancy and other characteristics of the dark side of sibling alliances, in more normative cases sibling alliances often reflect cohesion, solidarity, and trust that may be important for promoting sibling closeness later in life. Children learn through these alliances that they have a unique knowledge of their sibling—one that others, including their parents, are not fully privy to. One can argue that children's capacities for emotional understanding are reflected in the ways in which they treat this knowledge; for example, children who understand that the disclosure of this knowledge would hurt their sibling

may be more likely to maintain confidences and work to protect their sibling's interests. In accordance with family systems theory (Minuchin, 1974), through experiences such as these, children learn that alliances in relationships matter and can be used strategically.

Parental Differential Treatment

Some sibling alliances are threatened by parental differential treatment. Especially in adolescence, siblings frequently engage in processes of social comparison (Feinberg, McHale, Crouter, & Cumsille, 2003) in which they size up their relative personal assets, strengths, and weaknesses while also monitoring the treatment each receives from parents, particularly along dimensions of affection and control (Daniels & Plomin, 1985). Even young children are sensitive to how they are treated by each of their parents in relation to their brothers and sisters (Pike, Coldwell, & Dunn, 2005). Experiences such as these offer repeated opportunities to learn about emotions. For example, the management of feelings of jealousy in response to a sibling's preferred treatment may call upon children to exercise skills in appropriately expressing and regulating disappointment, anger, or rage. Adolescents who consider why a parent may direct greater affection or less control toward their sibling and form attributions that frame the parental behaviors as meeting a unique need of this sibling—and in so doing, demonstrate forms of perspective taking and emotional understanding—tend to enjoy more positive relationships with their sibling (Kowal & Kramer, 1997). Conversely, difficulty in regulating feelings of jealousy with respect to perceived parental preferential treatment of a sibling has been hypothesized as contributing to persistent challenges with emotional control across development (Volling et al., 2002). Adolescents who have frequent conflicts with siblings centering on issues of equality and fairness were shown to experience increased depressed mood over the course of 1 year (Campione-Barr, Greer, & Kruse, 2013).

Although children and adolescents regularly complain about differential treatment that they consider unfair, they do not tend to talk about these issues with parents in ways that lead to mutual awareness, understanding, and change (Kowal, Krull, & Kramer, 2006). Individual family members typically report different perceptions and attributions about the occurrence of parental differential treatment in their homes, for example, in terms of how much parental differential treatment occurs, which child receives preferred treatment from which parent, and why it occurs (Kowal et al., 2006). This represents an interesting dynamic in which emotions are charged but, because of a lack of communication that might clarify and correct misattributions, emotional understanding and affective perspective taking are weak. As a result, family members may fail to develop a shared understanding of a critical family process—one that might be readily improved with greater emotional awareness and a willingness to engage in affective perspective taking. The following section explores ways in which experts may assist siblings and their families to intentionally develop competencies in emotional understanding and to use these competencies to enhance dimensions of their individual and family well-being.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF SIBLINGS' EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Siblings can be important sources of support for one another as their families face critical life events and challenges. Jenkins (1992) found that children growing up in homes marked

by interparental conflict had fewer adjustment problems if their mothers reported that they had a good sibling relationship. Similarly, sibling affection may lessen the level of internalizing behavior problems demonstrated by children experiencing significant stressful life events (Gass, Jenkins, & Dunn, 2007). Even at very young ages, children often offer support and caregiving to their younger siblings when they are distressed (Stewart & Marvin, 1984). Of particular interest is the finding that sibling caregiving occurred more often during the Strange Situation assessment when preschoolers exhibited higher levels of emotional role taking (Garner, Jones, & Palmer, 1994).

Being proud of a sibling when that child accomplishes something that is important to him or her entails affective perspective taking, an appreciation of what is important to the sibling, and perhaps subjugation of their personal desires to support the sibling. The recognition that one can experience multiple feelings at once, or conflicted feelings (e.g., pride in a sibling's accomplishments combined with a taste of jealousy), is a developmental achievement (Harter & Buddin, 1987).

Following Howe et al. (2001), children who have more well developed competencies in emotional understanding have the potential to offer realistic and, hypothetically, more effective assistance for siblings as they manage various life challenges. For example, with their firsthand knowledge and affective perspective-taking abilities, they may be able to offer clearer advice for how siblings can manage their relationships with peers, such as how to make friends, how to avoid negative peer influences, and how to respond to bullying. Similarly, children have a unique knowledge of the schools their siblings attend and can provide realistic tips for how to navigate the school building, how to behave in the lunchroom, as well as how to satisfy demanding teachers (Kramer, 2011).

Unfortunately, very limited research has been conducted on the ways in which siblings' capacities for emotional understanding can have positive implications for their success in contexts beyond the family. This is an important area for future research. Next I address what is currently known about how practitioners and parents might increase the likelihood that children reap benefits in emotional understanding through their relationships with siblings.

ENHANCING EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING THROUGH PREVENTIVE INTERVENTION PROGRAMS

Preventive intervention programs, such as the Fun With Sisters and Brothers Program (Kramer & Radey, 1997) for preschoolers with an infant or toddler-age sibling and the More Fun With Sisters and Brothers Program (MFWSB; Kennedy & Kramer, 2008) for siblings ages 4 to 8 years, intentionally build upon socialization processes that promote the development of social and emotional understanding. In the latter program, 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. With respect to promoting emotional understanding, children participating in MFWSB are taught to *identify* feelings and emotions in one's self and others that commonly arise in sibling interactions, with special attention to widening children's emotion vocabularies so that they can label subtle and/or blended emotions and distinguish emotions that are often confused (e.g., hate vs. frustration, anger vs. disappointment). In addition, children are taught to *monitor* their own feelings and, in particular, to identify the initial signs and bodily

sensations that accompany frustration and other negative emotions commonly experienced within the sibling context. Children are also taught to *evaluate* their feelings before acting in order to identify the occasions in which they may need to *modify* their emotion states (e.g., to calm themselves or self-soothe) before responding to their sibling. Furthermore, children are taught to deescalate frustrating episodes so that they can *lessen the intensity* of their response and effectively communicate with their sibling. Finally, children are taught a method of instructional self-talk, self-control, and *emotion regulation* that they can use in potentially problematic sibling encounters so that 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 their interactions, that differ fundamentally from their own. This explicit instruction in detecting instances in which siblings have unique emotional reactions to identical stimuli, and learning to view these differences as valid and worthy of exploration and discussion, are integral components that assist children in furthering emotional understanding (LaBounty et al., 2008). These 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, as well as 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, the social and emotional competencies taught in the program. Learning together to broaden their emotion vocabularies and to regulate their emotions is expected to facilitate their communication about feelings, thoughts, and needs. In fact, improvements in emotion regulation (Kennedy & Kramer, 2008), perspective taking (Kramer, Schell, & Kramer, 2010), and conflict management (Kramer & Kennedy, 2013) gained through the program have been linked with greater positivity in sibling interactions.

Siblings in Counseling

Children's extensive knowledge of their siblings' emotional experiences can be of immense value to clinicians who are helping children overcome developmental or psychological issues and/or cope with family stress and change (Feinberg et al., 2012). Within a family systems therapy framework, mental health providers can take advantage of children's understanding of their sibling's emotional reactions to lead discussions about the types of events that each child finds challenging and how they might address these (Kahn & Lewis, 1988). For example, children can be asked to share examples of how they have observed their sibling manage similar stressful events in the past, thereby leading to discussions about the emotional resources each possesses to address stressful circumstances and how they might adaptively anticipate and prepare to face new challenges. Through processes such as these, children can become effective auxiliary coaches who use their intimate knowledge of their sibling to help him or her to react effectively in emotionally charged situations, thereby furthering one another's capacity for emotional understanding.

Jon Caspi (2011) contended that sibling relationships themselves can be an effective focus for therapies aimed at helping families and specific family members cope with a variety of stressors, such as parental divorce or childhood anxiety. Instead of focusing exclusively on the intrapsychic factors that may contribute to these mental health issues, clinicians can focus on the sibling

relationship itself so that siblings can help one another acquire and sustain more adaptive interpersonal behaviors and sociocognitive and emotional competencies. For example, mental health problems such as child anxiety and depression, typically conceptualized as individual disorders, may be responsive to interventions targeted at siblings rather than at individual children. Kramer (2011) argued that a range of treatment possibilities open up for practitioners when they consider the potential that supportive sibling relationships have for promoting individual well-being. This is a fruitful line of inquiry for clinical research.

CONCLUSION

Sibling relationships are natural contexts for learning about the world of emotion. Dunn (2007) captured this brilliantly:

> [Siblings'] ability to deceive, to tease, to manage conflict by anticipating the other's perspective, to share an imaginative world in joint pretend, and to engage in conversations about why people behave the way they do, referring to mental states and feelings as causes and consequences of action, all reflect a growing understanding of connections between inner states and behavior, and all are seen in the interactions between siblings from rising 2 year old to 4 years . . . The message of the sibling research is not only that these developments begin considerably earlier than suspected but that it is the emotional context and familiarity of the sibling relationship that can play an important part in the growth of understanding. (pp. 318–319)

The current analysis also suggests that a more accurate picture of the development of emotional understanding is likely to result when researchers leave the laboratory and observe young siblings in their natural habitats, such as their homes, performing their typical everyday behaviors and interacting with the people they normally encounter.

This critical analysis expands Dunn's view to further suggest ways in which experts might harness the potential of children's growth in emotional understanding through their encounters with siblings to affect positive outcomes for child development. In examining sibling interaction in three diverse contexts (i.e., conflict/conflict management, play, and sibling–parent interaction), I have explored ways in which emotional understanding develops during the course of normative sibling interaction, thereby contributing in instrumental ways to the development of young children.

By drawing upon established theoretical frameworks of social learning theory and family systems theory, one can see how critical it is for researchers and clinicians to intentionally study the ways in which siblings spur one another's development of emotional understanding. Social learning appears to be a most important process by which siblings acquire knowledge about emotions—what specific emotions look like when enacted by others, how to identify and label them, the markers that distinguish one emotion from one another, ways to respond in the face of confusing mixed or blended emotions, the display rules that govern the socially appropriate expressions of emotions with respect to context, as well as how to form realistic expectancies about the consequences of emotional expression—and what they can expect to happen when emotions are expressed in particular ways in particular contexts.

Family systems theory offers a complementary vantage point from which researchers can understand how emotional understanding develops and functions within the dynamic sibling

relationship subsystem and within the larger family system. From this framework, one can see more clearly how children's experiences with emotions both draw from and impact the emotional and social worlds of their parents, grandparents, and extended members of their family system. The reciprocal nature of these influences is important to acknowledge; emotional understanding likely grows from, and in turn influences, sibling relationship quality.

Greater appreciation of developmental influences is needed to better understand how emotional understanding develops within a family system that is ever changing because of the maturation of its members and a host of internally and externally driven forces of change. Given the paucity of longitudinal studies, researchers lack full knowledge of how facets of emotional understanding and emotion regulation unfold across development. Knowledge of this dynamic, mutually enriching developmental system is far from complete, and so future researchers are charged with further discerning the ways in which siblings offer unique opportunities for the growth of emotional understanding as well as how emotional understanding promotes sibling relationship quality.

In summary, the evidence is compelling that the wide range of challenges and opportunities afforded by sibling relationships are formative for several facets of children's development. Still, sibling relationships are untapped resources for encouraging emotional understanding and regulation, and additional research on this issue is sorely needed. Becoming more cognizant of these opportunities will enable parents, teachers, and clinicians to help children harness the potential of sibling relationships to enhance positive development.

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