Supportive Sibling Relationships

Laurie Kramer

University of Illinois

Reprinted from J. Caspi (Ed.) (2011), *Sibling Development: Implications for Mental Health Practitioners* (pp. 41-58). New York: Springer.

Perhaps what is most notable about sibling relationships is exactly what makes these relationships most mundane: siblings typically grow up together living in the same household, sharing the same parents and extended family members, and experiencing virtually the same life events. In addition to engaging in an almost continual flow of interaction through shared daily activities that elicit a wide range of emotions and behaviors, siblings experience a host of common life events. Together, they face a never-ending series of normative and non-normative life events, transitions, and stressors. Although individual brothers and sisters may not understand and interpret each of these life events in exactly the same way (Kowal, Krull & Kramer, 2007), having a sibling— especially one who is willing to listen, support, console, or to help you manage unsettling events— can be of immense value for coping with life's challenges and building resilience. Who else but a sibling can truly understand what life in your family is like? Who else can help you interpret and understand your parents' irrational behaviors? Even if siblings do not have deep conversations about these events, they are aware that their brother or sister possesses a similar knowledge of their unique family—a knowledge that is simply not accessible to those outside the family. This shared understanding—or at least the potential to create a shared understanding— may be the essence and value of supportive sibling relationships.

This chapter will describe the key components of supportive sibling relationships, while addressing the ways in which siblings may help individuals become resilient, strengthen their capacity to cope with life stressors, and perhaps, compensate for difficulties experienced in other relationships. The potential that sibling relationships hold for individual development and family coping are immense, yet they may often be overlooked. Finally, the chapter will address emerging methods for increasing the likelihood that sibling relationships will indeed be supportive relationships and offers recommendations for practice and future research.

What is Support?

As discussed in this chapter, there are many different ways in which siblings exchange support. From a behavioral standpoint, siblings behave in a myriad of ways that appear to be positive and supportive in nature— for example, siblings often help one another, teach each other new skills or provide new information, and, on occasion, listen and commiserate with one another's concerns. Defending, sticking up for one another, and loyalty in the face of adversity and challenge, are also acts that even casual observers of sibling interactions would consider to be indices of support. Similarly, the attachment between siblings that is often demonstrated at very early ages may also be a visible example of sibling support. For example, toddler-aged children typically seek contact with a sibling when distressed or when separated from a parent, especially when older siblings respond with comfort and reassurance (Teti & Ablard, 1989). But support may also be exchanged between

siblings in more subtle ways, for example, with a downturned smile as an expression of concern when one is being chastised by an adult, with a thumbs up or reassuring nod of confidence when one is about to serve the volleyball, or a chuckle when one is chastised by a parent for drinking out of the milk carton. In fact, it is possible that any form of positive interaction could be interpreted by a child as supportive—even teasing could be experienced as supportive if it is viewed as a way to affirm or validate the individual or the relationship.

A major thesis of this chapter is that it is the everyday interactions that siblings have with one another that form the basis of a supportive relationship. While this doesn't help clarify the array of terminology that has been used in the literature to describe supportive sibling relationships—*affective behaviors*, such as warmth, involvement, affection, loyalty, and attachment, and *instrumental behaviors* indicating support, such as teaching, helping, caregiving, and consoling— it does give us liberty to understand sibling support from a variety of vantage points. Thus, understanding exactly what a supportive sibling relationship is remains an important question for research and practice. This review aims to help clarify the dimensions of supportive sibling relationships in the hope that carefully crafted research will be performed to further distill and validate its essential characteristics.

A Lifelong Relationship

Over the course of development, siblings play an instrumental role as informal sources of information, instruction, advice, and help. Cross-cultural research has reinforced the value of sibling relationships as contexts for extending nurturance, comfort, caregiving, teaching, and loyalty across development (Weisner, 1989; Zukow-Goldring, 2002). Children as young as four years of age have been shown to be effective teachers and caregivers to their young sisters and brothers (Stewart, 1983; Stewart & Marvin, 1984). Even in infancy, siblings reliably turn to older siblings for comfort during times of stress (Teti & Ablard, 1989). Their role as guides and mentors increase as siblings enter adolescence and as the relationship becomes more reciprocal as they develop a similar knowledge of the social contexts in which each operates. Adults who are aging successfully commonly report having a supportive relationship with a sibling (Bedford, 1995; Connidis & Davies, 1992; Goetting, 1986; Gold, 1989; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1990). For example, in the Vaillants' classic longitudinal study of Harvard graduates, 93% of men who were thriving at age 65 reported having had a close relationship with a brother or sister during their college days. Given the limited information we current have about continuity and change in sibling relationships (Kramer, 2004), it is unlikely that sibling relationships suddenly become positive and supportive in older adulthood; rather, the seeds for a strong supportive relationship are probably either sown during the early years of these relationships or come about more intentionally through intervention (Kramer, 2010) or through the resolution of childhood conflicts and rivalries (Conger & Little, 2010). In either case, sibling relationships can indeed be supportive relationships for individuals across the life course, and that as such, they have substantial developmental significance.

The Daily Fabric of Sibling Life

There are a number of interpersonal processes that commonly occur in sibling relationships,

especially in childhood, that make supportive exchanges both more likely and more valuable for development. Consider the playful interactions of preschool siblings: at first glance, it appears that siblings engaged in fantasy play are simply having a great deal of fun with one another (that is, between the occasional squabbles). And in fact, the experience of having fun together is important as it strengthens the sense of cohesion and solidarity that children need in order to form a supportive relationship that will endure over time (Gottman, 1983). However, when you look more closely at the range of behaviors and affects that are expressed during fantasy play, it is apparent that children demonstrate remarkable social-cognitive competencies within this context (Gottman, 1983; Howe, Petrakos, Rinaldi & LeFebvre, 2005; Kramer & Schaefer-Hernan, 1994). The coordination of an extended fantasy or dramatic play episode takes considerable expertise as children must work together to coordinate a wide range of behaviors and emotions that follow a spontaneously evolving plot, directing each other through a sometimes very complex set of pretense actions, all while staying within the non-literal frame of pretense. In addition to developing a shared understanding of the play theme, children must communicate and coordinate their actions by giving each other cues and prompts to advance the plot, assuming each other's perspectives, helping one another, sharing, taking turns, and managing conflicts, all while staying in character and acting within the confines of the play scenario. This ability to develop such a shared understanding— even if it is simply within the world of play— may be one of the rudiments of sibling support. In sum, many of the everyday, taken for granted activities that young siblings engage in may actually be supportive encounters, functioning as important tools for solidifying involvement and closeness—key ingredients for building resilience.

Siblings provide daily practice in understanding the minds of others—a skill that comes in quite handy for negotiating complex social interactions beyond the confines of the family. For example, Pernoff, Ruffman, and Leekam's (1994) study, "Theory of Mind Is Contagious: You Catch It From Your Sibs," demonstrates that 3- and 4-year old children with an older sibling were much better able to detect a false belief than children without siblings. This practice in social understanding and understanding the mental states of others may lay the groundwork for the development of empathy (Dunn, 1988). Siblings know what makes the other tick— what will set him off or settle her down. Of course, this knowledge can be used for good or evil. Whereas understanding a sibling's vulnerabilities and taking advantage of this knowledge through cruel actions or words may reflect a form of sociocognitive sophistication, this may be better considered as relational aggression (Ostrov, Crick & Stauffacher, 2006), or in severe cases, emotional abuse, rather than sibling support.

Although levels of fantasy engagement drop off in adolescence, teenage siblings do find ways to connect during the course of daily family life; some of these modes of interaction have supportive functions. In a study of adolescent siblings' reports of social support in the domains of family, social life, schoolwork and risky behaviors, Tucker, McHale and Crouter (2001) found that older siblings provided support to their younger sibs around issues related to school, social life and risky behaviors,

presumably because they were perceived as more knowledgeable and experienced in these areas. Older sisters, in particular, tend to provide greater support around peer relationship issues, especially if they possessed relatively strong social competencies. In contrast, older and younger siblings were most likely to reciprocally exchange support with regard to family issues rather than school, social life or risky behaviors. The authors reasoned that shared experiences in the family may facilitate a more even exchange of support among sisters and brothers who, in this sample, were on average 2 years apart. Most importantly, across almost all domains, the provision of sibling support was most likely to occur when siblings reported having a more positive relationship. And, because support was not related to the amount of time siblings reported spending together, it may be the *quality* of the sibling relationship, and not the *quantity* of interaction, that is most strongly associated with the establishment of supportive sibling encounters. For example, siblings who engage in high levels of conflict may be highly engaged and involved with one another, but this is quite different from siblings who spend less time together but whose encounters are marked by positive affect, understanding, and instrumental forms of support, such as helping.

Because of their familiarity and accessibility, siblings may be viewed as relatively "safe" individuals can confide in, seek advice, or ask informational questions that they may be embarrassed to ask peers or teachers, particularly when they fear that the mere asking of a question may reveal "risky" personal information one wishes to hide from parents. For example, Kowal and Blinn-Pike (2004) found that adolescents who were willing to talk to their siblings about safe sex practices were less likely to report "risky" attitudes about sexual behaviors and were more confident about their ability to communicate with their partners about safe sex practices. This was especially true when communication with parents about these issues was also open and when the sibling relationship was viewed as positive. Thus, a trusting relationship between siblings can help prevent behaviors linked with long-term negative impacts.

The "involuntary" nature of sibling relationships—children do not get to select their siblings or decide whether or not the relationship will continue—also makes it possible for siblings to engage in and experiment with certain behaviors that may not be well received in other relationships. For example, siblings enact forms of conflict and antagonism with their siblings that may have disastrous consequences were they to occur outside the family; for example, issuing insults and threats to a peer on a regular basis (as one might do with a sibling) risks the end of the friendship. Although the same behaviors with a sibling may lead to prolonged squabbling and an escalation of agonism and other forms of animosity, the relationship will be preserved—the sibs will remain as sisters and brothers. Whereas one might argue that children may be better off without any of these antagonistic behaviors in their repertoire, research supports the supposition that children benefit from experiences with non-destructive forms of conflict with siblings as they gain practice in ways to engage in constructive forms of conflict, acquire conflict management and resolution strategies, and learn strategies for regulating affect, while also learning more about their own identity, beliefs and values

(Katz, Kramer & Gottman, 1992; Shantz & Hobart, 1989). So, as unpleasant as it may be, within limits, sibling conflict may be considered to serve key developmental functions.

Ambivalence

Especially in childhood, sibling relationships are notorious for fluctuating rapidly between extreme forms of interpersonal behaviors, along with a full complement of corresponding intense emotions. Moments after a quarrel, it's not unusual to see children engaged in harmonious play and conversation, or one helping the other to tie a shoe, work the VCR, or download a new song for an iPod. As competent as children are in detecting each other's vulnerabilities (and using this knowledge to push each other's buttons), they are often equally facile in knowing just what to say to help a sibling cope with a disappointment, to calm themselves in a stressful situation, or encourage them to persist in the face of frustration. Wide individual variations exist, of course, in siblings' achievement of these complex socio-emotional-cognitive tasks, and understanding what leads a set of siblings more often towards the supportive and caring range of interpersonal dynamics, rather than the antagonistic, is a subject of much of sibling science.

Warmth and involvement in the sibling relationship is a reliable forecaster of children's psychosocial adjustment. For example, Modry-Mandrell, Gamble, and Taylor (2007) demonstrated that after controlling for a host of child and family characteristics, parents' ratings of sibling warmth predicted lower levels of child behavior problems over a 6-month period among preschool-aged children (in this case, children of predominantly Mexican descent), assessed using both maternal and teacher report. Fifth and sixth grade children in Furman and Buhrmester's (1985) study reported that companionship (93%), admiration (81%), prosocial behaviors (77%), and affection (65%) were the most common positive qualities of their sibling relationships. Of course, negative qualities, such as antagonism (91%) and quarreling (79%), were also commonly endorsed, which is consistent with the view that sibling relationships are best described as ambivalent (Dunn, 1988), marked by both positive and negative relationship dynamics.

Because the evidence is clear that more positive sibling relationships foreshadow better developmental outcomes (e.g., Brody, 1998; Kim, McHale, Crouter, & Osgood, 2007; Pike, Coldwell, & Dunn, 2005), the key question is how to clearly identify the factors that best promote prosocial and supportive sibling relationships. Given the ambivalent nature of sibling relationships, we must ascertain what the most optimal balance of positive and negative social processes may be so that we can foster the best outcomes for particular sibling groups (Kramer & Bank, 2005). And from there, we must learn how to effectively harness the most functional aspects of sibling relationships to advance children's social and emotional development (Kramer, 2010; Stormshak, Bullock & Falkenstein, 2009) and, ultimately, to strengthen the sibling relationship. As discussed below, strong supportive sibling relationships may be instrumental for building resilience and helping children cope with life stressors.

Resiliency in the Face of Psychosocial Challenges and Risk Factors

The value of sibling relationships for coping with life stressors is an emerging area of interest.

Jenkins (1992) proposed that sibling relationships can indeed serve as protective factors when children are coping with stressors such as parental separation and divorce. For example, Jenkins and Smith (1990) found that children who were exposed to high levels of interparental conflict were less likely to exhibit adjustment problems if the quality of their sibling relationship was relatively positive. Gass, Jenkins and Dunn (2007) extended this line of research to test longitudinal associations between sibling relationship quality and changes in child adjustment over time in accordance with familial experiences of stressful life events. Indeed, affectionate sibling relationships were found to moderate the association between stressful life events and child adjustment; having a more affectionate relationship with a sibling predicted fewer changes in *internalizing* behavior problems over a 2-year period in comparison to siblings with a less affectionate relationship, even in the face of significant stress, and even when controlling for the contributions of mother-child relationship quality. The corresponding associations for *externalizing* behavior problems were not significant. Interestingly, sibling affection, in the absence of stressful life events, was not a significant predictor of later child adjustment. This suggests that even though sibling support may not play a major role in promoting child well-being under non-stressful conditions, the value of sibling support may come into force when the family system is under stress. Gass et al. contend that "the provision of security and comfort once ascribed mainly to parental figures *may* also be a role that siblings can fulfill when children experience stress caused by life events" (p. 172). This is in line with Jenkins, Smith and Graham's (1989) finding that children considered seeking contact with a sibling and confiding in their sibling as key mechanisms for coping with parental conflict. As discussed below, one important implication of these results for practitioners is that family adjustment and coping could potentially be enhanced by strengthening the sibling relationship.

Conger, Stocker and McGuire (2009) reviewed the role of siblings when coping with a variety of critical life events, including placement into foster care, parental separation and divorce, and the developmental disability of a sibling. In each situation, the sibling bond was found to be a critical source of resiliency for children that, in many cases, offered children emotional support and comfort, a sense of identity, as well as concrete forms of assistance. For example, siblings placed together in foster care exhibit fewer emotional and behavioral problems than siblings placed apart (Herrick & Piccus, 2005; Smith 1998). Furthermore, rates of placement disruption were lower for children placed with siblings (Leathers, 2005) and these children were more likely to experience a permanent placement through either adoption or reunification with a biological parent (Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005).

Although growing up with a child who has a developmental delay or physical limitation is certainly challenging, research has also identified a host of developmental achievements that may be experienced by typically developing siblings in these families. By assuming roles of caregiver, teacher, advocate and protector, typically developing siblings may gain a sense of maturity and an understanding of diversity that may exceed that of children without siblings in need and that can be invaluable for addressing other life challenges

(Conger et al., 2009). The quality of the relationship experienced by developmentally challenged children and their siblings, of course, vary dramatically and may be significantly influenced by the level of functioning achieved by the former and the degree to which the typically challenged child manages to cope with normative reactions of embarrassment, frustration, confusion, and concerns of being overlooked (Conger et al., 2009).

Siblings as Protective Influences

Simply having a sibling is probably not enough to help children and adolescents cope with significant life stressors; the quality of the sibling relationship may be what is paramount. Following Rutter's (1987) construct of resilience, Soli, McHale and Feinberg (2009) state that support and emotional intimacy in sibling relationships may function as protective factors, buffering children "against the negative consequences of exposure to a risk factor and/or they can promote healthy adjustment by establishing and maintaining self-esteem and self-efficacy" (p. 579) . Children are more likely to confide in siblings they trust and imitate siblings they admire and respect. In a volume on siblings as agents of socialization, Whiteman, Becerra and Killoren (2009) discuss the mechanisms by which children tend to emulate, or differentiate, from their siblings. Although these processes are not yet fully understood, we do know that children are more likely to adopt some of the positive characteristics of their sibling through a process of social learning and modeling, especially when that sibling is a respected and admired model. Alternately, through a process of deidentification, children may elect to choose to carve out a unique path or identity that is based, at least in part, in reaction to their perception of their siblings (Schachter, Shore, Feldman-Rotman, Marquis, & Campbell, 1976; Whiteman, McHale & Crouter, 2007).

Not all support is "good support." We know from research on delinquency (Criss & Shaw, 2005; Slomkowski, Rende, Conger & Rueter, 1996), substance use (Rende, Slomkowski, Lloyd-Richardson & Niaura, 2005; Snyder, Bank & Burraston, 2005), smoking (Forrester, Biglan, Severson & Smolkowski, 2007; Harakeh, Engels, Vermulst, DeVries, & Scholte, 2007), and adolescent pregnancy (East, 1998) that having a positive relationship with a sibling who is engaged in deviant or undesirable activities increases the odds that the child or adolescent will join in such activities. Soli et al. (2009) reported that among a sample of African American adolescent siblings, greater warmth in the sibling relationship was linked with more risky behaviors on the part of elder siblings, but only when warmth occurred in concert with low values of familism. Familism entails the valuing of family connections and interdependence, especially with regard to familial support, obligation, and solidarity. Contrary to expectations, greater sibling warmth was also linked with more depressive symptoms among younger, but not older, siblings. Whereas these results may point to some undesirable effects of sibling support, it may also be the case that elder siblings behave in responsive and supportive ways when they perceive that their younger siblings are depressed. Effective research designs that include longitudinal assessments, and when possible experimental rather than correlational methods, are needed to clarify the protective, and perhaps compensatory, effects of sibling support.

What about compensatory functions? Can a good sibling relationship "counteract" the negative impact that comes with poor peer relationships? Lockwood, Gaylord, Kitzmann and Cohen (2002) did not find that having a sibling buffered African American 3rd to 5th graders from either family stress or rejection by peers although such a protective effect was found for a sample of white middle class children. In the latter group, children with siblings were less aggressive with peers than children without siblings, and this difference was especially strong when families experienced higher levels of stress. However, this study did not take into account the quality of children's sibling relationship; warmth, closeness and involvement in the sibling relationship may be critical factors that set the stage for the provision of support and may help account for the varying results in Lockwood et al.'s study. For example, Stormshak et al. (1996) demonstrated that social competence with peers in middle childhood was positively associated with warmth in the sibling relationship and negatively associated with sibling conflict. In a longitudinal examination, Kim et al. (2007) extended these findings to show that increases in sibling intimacy from middle childhood through adolescence were associated with gains in peer competence. In addition, girls with more positive sibling relationships exhibited fewer depressive symptoms in adolescence.

Sibling Diversity

The discussion above confirms that a body of research is now accumulating that examines variations in sibling relationships in accordance with factors such as ethnicity, race, family structure and child characteristics, such as gender and age constellation, birth order, and developmental status. Although full examination of these findings is well beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to recognize that indicants of diversity may play key roles in understanding supportive sibling relationships. For example, values of familism have been identified as performing an essential function in helping African American adolescents who have a warm relationship with their sibling to avoid risky behaviors (Soli et al., 2009). Updegraff's work with Mexican American families also highlights the importance of familism values, especially in promoting positive sibling relationships (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer & Delgado; 2005). Levels of sibling intimacy were highest among sisters who reported stronger values of familism, leading Updegraff et al. to suggest that through their "kin-keeping roles," girls, particularly in Mexican American families, serve as important sources of social support for family members (p. 520).

Findings such as these reinforce the potential importance of age and gender constellation for sibling support. African American adolescents in Soli et al.'s (2009) study reported having a closer relationship with their sisters and with siblings who were closer in age. Same-sex Mexican American siblings in the Updegraff et al. (2005) study reported spending more time with one another than siblings of different genders. Interestingly, siblings in this study reported spending an average of 17 hours a week together, which is significantly more than the 10 hours per week that European American siblings reported in a related study by Tucker (2004). Again, the value of familism, with its emphasis on family support and interdependence, may account for these cultural variations.

As implied from the emerging research on siblings from African American and Mexican American families, the provision of emotional and instrumental support from a sibling may be particularly important for children who are learning to navigate new social terrains or even familiar social environments that present significant challenges such as discrimination, prejudice and oppression. Having a sibling who truly understands these challenges, and who perhaps has developed some strategies for responding to them, can be critical and represent sibling support at its highest level. For example, in addition to demonstrating an understanding of the hurt one feels in these situations, an older sibling can coach a child how to avoid, deflect or confront prejudicial treatment as appropriate. Similar processes may be in place in sibling relationships in which one child has a developmental or physical disability. Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted as of yet to clarify the role of sibling support under these critical circumstances.

Increasing the Likelihood that Sibling Relationships will be Supportive

Parents want their children's relationships to be harmonious and supportive and to continue to be supportive across the life course, as this enhances the likelihood that their children will provide help and assistance to one another later in life when they are no longer able to perform these functions themselves (Kramer & Baron, 1995). We know from longitudinal studies that without intervention the quality of sibling relationships tends to be relatively stable over time (Dunn, Slomkowski & Beardsall, 1994; Kramer & Gottman, 1992; Kramer & Kowal, 2005). For example, in a longitudinal observational study of 30 families, Kramer and Kowal (2005) found that the overall percentage of positive interaction was highly correlated at successive time points, spanning from the early entrance of a second child in the family (age 1 month) to when this child entered high school and the firstborn child left the household for college or employment. While this suggests that siblings who begin their relationship on a positive note are likely to sustain positive engagement as they grow up together, it is also the case that siblings who have relationships marked by conflict and antagonism are also likely to continue in this fashion unless some intervention is enacted to change the course of this trajectory (Kramer, 2004).

Surprisingly, few studies have directly addressed the ways in which positive engagement among siblings contributes to enhanced sibling relationship quality. However, Kramer and Gottman's (1992) longitudinal study of the development of sibling relationships identified four major social processes observed in firstborn children's interaction with their best friends that were highly predictive of prosocial sibling relationships over a 13-year period. These processes were: maintaining connected play interactions and communication, fantasy play engagement, establishing a non-negative emotional climate, and conflict management. Interestingly, levels of conflict engagement did not predict sibling relationship quality although abilities to manage conflict and negative affect did. Although these social processes were observed in the context of friendship interaction, Kramer and Radey (1997) demonstrated that it was possible to teach these competencies to preschool-aged children with the Fun with Sisters and Brothers preventive intervention program, resulting in

greater positivity in their interactions with infant and toddler-aged siblings.

More recently, Kramer's team developed the More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program for 4- to 8-year-old siblings that teaches a set of social and emotional competencies that research has demonstrated to be critical for establishing prosocial sibling interactions among children of this developmental level (Kennedy & Kramer, 2008). Over the course of 5 sessions, small groups of sibling dyads were taught methods for: (1) initiating social interaction and play; (2) appropriately declining invitations to play; (3) perspective-taking; (4) identifying and expanding one's emotional vocabulary; (5) regulating intense emotions; and (6) conflict management. A parent education component supports the maintenance and generalization of training gains to the home and other natural contexts. Results indicated that in addition to increasing prosocial interactions among siblings in comparison to a wait list control group, participants demonstrated significant increases in their ability to regulate their emotions in ways that allowed parents to lessen their external regulation. Ongoing research is examining the contributions of the additional social-emotional competencies targeted in the Fun with Sisters and Brothers interventions, such as perspective-taking, problem solving and conflict management. This program of research illustrates the ways in which experimental interventions may be powerful tools for ascertaining the effective components of intervention and prevention strategies while also advancing the development of theoretical models with which to understand the contributions of sibling relationships to child and family development. For example, research in this vein has demonstrated that while the instruction of social and emotional competencies can be effective for increasing positivity in sibling interactions, an "unintentional" benefit is that the proportion of negative sibling encounters that are observed declines. This is an important effect in light of previous findings indicating that interventions that focus exclusively on reducing conflict tend to do exactly that and little more; that is, the suppression of conflict that is achieved through these interventions tend to lead siblings to become disengaged from one another (Leitenberg et al., 1977). Warm, involved and supportive relationships are unlikely to emerge unless the intervention also intentionally builds a repertoire of socially and emotionally competent sibling-directed interactions. This finding has critical implications for practice—as siblings are most often referred to treatment because of pronounced conflict, clinicians may be understandably tempted to focus first on reducing conflict. Better results may emerge when forms of positive engagement are first strengthened, even if some conflict continues.

Helping children to develop social and emotional competencies that set the stage for positive sibling engagement is certainly one mechanism for optimizing the occurrence of sibling support. Given their linkages with social and emotional well-being, family-centered interventions can also take advantage of sibling socialization processes to enhance outcomes for at-risk children and youth. Brotman et al. (2005) found that an intervention that focused on strengthening the parenting of preschool children was also linked with older siblings' improved peer relationships and reduced antisocial behaviors even though most of these adolescents did not directly participate in the

intervention. The investigators contend that the intervention was successful in improving parenting practices that, in turn, had a beneficial effect in reducing problem behaviors among other children in the family. In another promising line of intervention research, Dishion and Stormshak (2007) have developed the "EcoFit model" in which an ecological perspective is used, along with principles of behavior change, to assess and improve family management practices, parent-child and sibling relationships, with respect to developmental, social, and cultural contexts. The ecological assessment of family dynamics and a developmental perspective guides the selection of intervention strategies that are tailored to fit each family's needs for parental management, sibling interaction dynamics, and contexts of development and change. For example, Stormshak et al. (2009) explain that, "For families involved in coercive relationship patterns and those in which sibling collusion is undermining parents' authority in the home, interventions may be tailored to improve parents' ability to extinguish the coercive cycle, improve family relationship quality and reduce siblings' ability to negatively influence family dynamics" (p. 71). In contrast, in families where siblings are already close and supportive, the intervention program may take advantage of this asset and create additional opportunities for siblings to work together as a team, thereby solidifying their relationship, while addressing other needs of the family (Stormshak et al., 2009).

Essential Ingredients of Prosocial Sibling Relationships

The rapidly expanding literature and research base on children's sibling relationships is finally providing researchers and practitioners with some clues as to how we may promote the quality of these relationships, and therefore enhance the likelihood that siblings will exchange support in ways that promote optimal development and well-being across the life course. In her review of this literature, Kramer (2010) presents an emerging list of the essential competencies that can be promoted to enhance prosocial sibling relationships. This list includes: (1) positive engagement (e.g., play, conversation, the promotion of mutual interests among siblings); (2) cohesion (e.g., recognizing and valuing instances of help, support, protectiveness, cooperation, loyalty, trust and pride); (3) shared experiences that build support (e.g., appreciating siblings' unique knowledge of one another and of their family to strengthen bond; (4) social and emotional understanding (e.g., perspective-taking, decentering, learning to assess and respect siblings' unique views, needs, goals and interests as legitimate in their own right); (5) emotion regulation (e.g., identifying and managing emotions and behaviors in emotionally challenging and frustrating situations); (6) behavioral control (e.g., refraining from undesirable sibling-directed behaviors such as bossiness, teasing, failing to respect personal boundaries and space); (7) forming neutral or positive attributions regarding the siblings' intent (e.g., learning to check or correct faulty attributions that may falsely impute negative or hostile intent); (8) conflict management and problem solving (e.g., learning to consider conflicts as social problems and then using collaborative methods to solve these problems); and (9) evaluating parental differential treatment practices (e.g., openly discussing the impact that forms of parental differential treatment that are perceived as unfair and adjust parental behaviors so that

children's unique needs are met). This list should be viewed as an initial sketch that will be embellished by future research on the factors that contribute to sibling relationship quality. Despite the "incomplete" nature of this list, it is clear that there are many strategies that practitioners, educators and parents can utilize to promote the likelihood that individuals experience the benefits of sibling support.

Implications for Practice

As the above review suggests, sibling relationships may be potent contributors to child and adolescent well-being. Children who enjoy supportive and positive sibling relationships often exhibit fewer behavioral problems and better psychosocial outcomes. In fact, some authors have gone so far as to contend that because the entire family benefits when sibling relationships are strengthened, the sibling relationship itself might be an effective target for intervention when an individual, or even when the entire system, is under stress (Boer & Dunn, 1992). For example, Jenkins (1992) suggests that children growing up in a disharmonious home may benefit from a strengthened relationship with a sibling, particularly in cases where improvements in the marital relationship are unlikely to occur. Vandereycken and Van Vreckem (1992) have expanded their treatment of adolescent patients with anorexia to include siblings— both as "co-patients" (i.e., because they are also likely affected by the disorder themselves or affected by their sibs' symptoms) as well as "co-therapists" (i.e., because they can play a helpful role in both understanding and treating the disorder). The notion that family coping may be advanced by strengthening the sibling relationship is an attractive one that draws directly from family systems theory (e.g., Minuchin, 1988) but that has received little empirical evaluation. Clinical researchers are strongly encouraged to pursue this line of inquiry.

Another practice issue that merits serious investigation is the potential utility of identifying the sibling relationship itself as a target system for intervention, as an alternative to individual treatment. For example, it is possible that mental health problems such as child anxiety and depression, typically conceptualized as individual disorders, may be responsive to interventions targeted at siblings. Rather than focusing exclusively on the intrapsychic factors that may contribute to these mental health issues, attention to the sibling relationship itself may help children acquire and sustain a healthier repertoire of interpersonal behaviors and sociocognitive and emotional competencies. Thus, a range of treatment possibilities open up for practitioners when they consider the potential that supportive sibling relationships have for promoting individual well-being. Again, this is a fruitful line of inquiry for clinical research.

Conclusion

Growing up and going through life with a sibling can provide individuals with a source of support that may be under-recognized in its value and untapped in its capacity to promote individual and family well-being across the life course. This chapter has reviewed the many ways in which children and adults may experience and benefit from support exchanged with their sibling. As research continues to clarify the significance of sibling support for development, we must use these findings to develop new tools that will optimize the

supportive functions of these relationships to enhance individual and family development.

The pervasiveness of sibling relationships, and the paradoxically mundane yet profound ways in which these relationships impact our lives, make them critically important. Yes, there is a potentially dark side to sibling relationships and we must certainly understand and acknowledge these processes. Nonetheless, it is the harnessing of the potential through the development of new and creative prevention and intervention strategies that is likely to have the most potent impact on helping individuals and families benefit from supportive sibling relationships.

References

Bedford, V. H. (1995). Sibling relationships in middle adulthood and old age. In R. M. Bleiszner & V. H. Bedford (Eds.), *Handbook on aging and the family* (pp. 201-222). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Boer, F., & Dunn, J. (Eds.) (1992). *Children's sibling relationships: Developmental and clinical issues*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Brody, G. H. (1998). Sibling relationship quality: Its causes and consequences. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *49*, 1-24.

Brotman, L. M., Dawson-McClure, S., Gouley, K. K., McGuire, K., Burraston, B., & Bank, L. (2005). Older siblings benefit from a family-based preventive intervention for preschoolers at risk for conduct problems. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 581-591.

Conger, K. J., & Little, W. M. (2010). Sibling relationships during the transition to adulthood. *Child Development Perspectives*, in press.

Conger, K. J., Stocker, C., & McGuire, S. (2009). Sibling socialization: The effects of stressful life events and experiences. In L. Kramer & K. J. Conger (Eds.), *Siblings as agents of socialization*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *126*, 44-60. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Conger, R. D., & Rueter, M. A. (1996). Siblings, parents and peers: A longitudinal study of social influence in adolescent risk for alcohol use and abuse. In G. H. Brody (Ed.), *Sibling relationships: Their causes and consequences* (pp. 1-30). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Connidis, I. A., & Davies, L. (1992). Confidants and companions: Choices in later life. *Journal of Gerontology: Social Sciences*, *47*, S115-S122.

Criss, M. M., & Shaw, D. S. (2005) Sibling relationships as contexts for delinquency training in low income families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 592-600.

Dishion, T. J., & Stormshak, E. A. (2007). *Intervening in children's lives: An ecological, family-centered approach to mental health care.* Washington, DC: APA Books.

Dunn, J. (1988). *The beginnings of social understanding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dunn, J., Slomkowski, C., & Beardsall, L. (1994). Sibling relationships from the preschool period through middle childhood and early

adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, *30*, 315-324.

East, P. L. (1998). Impact of adolescent childbearing on families and younger siblings: Effects that increase younger siblings' risk for early pregnancy. *Applied Developmental Science*, *2*, 62-74.

Forrester, K., Biglan, A., Severson, H. H., & Smolkowski, K. (2007). Predictors of smoking onset over two years. *Nicotine & Tobacco Research, 9*, 1259-1267.

Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1985). Children's perceptions of the qualities of their sibling relationships. *Child Development, 56,* 448-461.

Gass, K., Jenkins, J., & Dunn, J. (2007). Are sibling relationships protective? A longitudinal study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *48*, 167-175.

Goetting, A. (1986). The developmental tasks of siblingship over the life cycle. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *48*, 703-714.

Gold, D. T. (1989). Generational solidarity: Conceptual antecedents and consequences. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *33*, 19-32.

Gottman, J. M. (1983). How children become friends. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* (*48,* Serial No. 201).

Harakeh, Z., Engels, R. C. M. E., Vermulst, A. A., DeVries, H., & Scholte, R. H. J. (2007). The influence of best friend and siblings on adolescent smoking: A longitudinal study. *Psychology and Health, 22*, 269-289.

He Herrick, M. A. & Piccus, W. (2005). Sibling connections: The importance of nurturing sibling bonds in the foster care system. *Children and Youth Services Review. Special Issue: Siblings in Foster Care and Adoption, 27*, 845-861.

Howe, N., Petrakos, H., Rinaldi, C. M., & LeFebvre, R. (2005). "This is a bad dog, you know…": Constructing shared meanings during sibling pretend play, *Child Development*, *76,* 783-794.

Jenkins, J. (1992). Sibling relationships in disharmonious homes: Potential difficulties and protective effects. In F. Boer & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Children's sibling relationships: Developmental and clinical issues* (pp. 125-138). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Jenkins, J. M., & Smith, M. A. (1990). Factors protecting children living in disharmonious homes: Maternal reports. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *29*, 60-69.

Jenkins, J. M., Smith, M. A., & Graham, P. J. (1989). Coping with parental quarrels. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, *28*, 182-189.

Katz, L. F., Kramer, L., & Gottman, J. M. (1992). Conflict and emotions in marital, sibling, and peer relationships. In C. U. Shantz & W. W. Hartup (Eds.), *Conflict in child and adolescent development* (pp. 122-149). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kennedy, D. E., & Kramer, L. (2008). Improving emotion regulation and sibling relationship quality: The More Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program. *Family Relations, 57,* 568-579.

Kim, J-Y., McHale, S. M., Crouter, A. C., & Osgood, D. W. (2007). Longitudinal linkages between sibling relationships and adjustment from middle childhood through adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, *43*, 960-973.

Kowal, A. K., & Blinn-Pike, L. (2004). Sibling influences on adolescents' attitudes towards safe sex practices. *Family Relations*, *53*, 377-384.

Kowal, A., Krull, J., & Kramer, L. (2007). Shared understanding of parental differential treatment in families. *Social Development*, *15*, 276-295.

Kramer, L., (2004). Experimental interventions in sibling relations. In R. D. Conger, F. O. Lorenz, & K. A. S. Wickrama (Eds.), *Continuity and change in family relations: Theory, methods, and empirical Findings*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Kramer, L. (2010). Essential ingredients of successful sibling relationships. *Child Development Perspectives, in press*.

Kramer, L., & Bank, L. (2005). Sibling relationship contributions to individual and family well-being: Introduction to the special issue. *Journal of Family Psychology, 19*, 483-485.

Kramer, L., & Baron, L. A. (1995). Parental perceptions of children's sibling relationships. *Family Relations*, *44*, 95-103.

Kramer, L., & Gottman, J. M. (1992). Becoming a sibling: "With a little help from my friends." *Developmental Psychology*, *28*, 685-699.

Kramer, L., & Kowal, A. (2005). Sibling relationship quality from birth to adolescence: The enduring contributions of friends. *Journal of Family Psychology, 19*, 503-511.

Kramer, L., & Radey, C. (1997). Improving sibling relationships among young children: A social skills training model. *Family Relations*, 46, 237-246.

Kramer, L., & Schaefer-Hernan, P. (1994). Patterns of fantasy play engagement across the transition to becoming a sibling. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *35,* 749-767.

Le

Leathers, S. J. (2005). Separation from siblings: Associations with placement adaptation and outcomes among adolescents in long-term foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 27*, 793-819.

Leitenberg, H., Burchard, J. D., Burchard, S. N., Fuller, E. J., & Lysaght, T. V. (1977). Using positive reinforcement to suppress behavior: Some experimental comparisons with sibling conflict. *Behavior Therapy*, *8,* 168-182.

Lockwood, R. L., Gaylord, N. K., Kitzmann, K. M., & Cohen, R. (2002). Family stress and children's rejection by peers: Do siblings provide a buffer? *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *11*, 331-345.

Minuchin, P. (1988). Relationships within the family: A systems perspective on development. In R. A. Hinde & J. Stevenson (Eds.), *Relationships within families* (pp. 7-26). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Modry-Mandell, K. L., Gamble, W. C., & Taylor, A. R. (2007). Family emotional climate and sibling relationship quality: Influences on behavioral problems and adaptation in

preschool-aged children. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *16*, 61-73.

Ostrov, J. M., Crick, N., & Stauffacher, K. (2006). Relational aggression and close relationships during early childhood. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology,* 27, 241-253.

Pernoff, J., Ruffman, T., & Leekam, S. R. (1994). Theory of mind is contagious: You catch it from your sibs. *Child Development*, *65*, 1228-1238.

Pike, A., Coldwell, J., & Dunn, J. F. (2005). Sibling relationships in early/middle childhood: Links with individual adjustment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 523-532.

Rende, R., Slomkowski, C., Lloyd-Richardson, E. & Niaura, R. (2005). Sibling effects on substance use in adolescence: Social contagion and genetic relatedness. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 611-618.

Rutter, M. (1987). Psychosocial resilience and protective mechanisms. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *57*, 316-331.

Schachter, F. F., Shore, E., Feldman-Rotman, S., Marquis, R. E. & Campbell, S. (1976). Sibling deidentification. *Developmental Psychology*, *12*, 418-427.

Shantz, C. U., & Hobart, C. J. (1989). Social conflict and development: Peers and siblings. In T. J. Berndt & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships in child development* (pp. 71-94). New York: Wiley.

Slomkowski, C., Rende, R., Conger, K., Simons, R., & Conger, R. (2001). Sisters, brothers, and delinquency: Evaluating social influence during early and middle adolescence. *Child Development*, *72*, 271-283.

Smith, M. C. (1998). Sibling placement in foster care: An exploration of associated concurrent preschool-aged child functioning. *Children and Youth Services Review, 20*, 389-412.

Snyder, J., Bank, L., & Burraston, B. (2005). The consequences of antisocial behavior in older male siblings for younger brothers and sisters. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 643-653.

Soli, A. R., McHale, S. M., & Feinberg, M. E. (2009). Risk and protective effects of sibling relationships among African American adolescents. *Family Relations*, *58*, 578-592.

Stewart, R. (1983). Sibling interaction: The role of the older child as a teacher for the younger. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *29*, 47-68.

Stewart, R., & Marvin, R. S. (1984). Sibling relations: The role of conceptual perspective-taking in the ontogeny of sibling caregiving. *Child Development*, *55*, 1322-1332.

Stormshak, E. A., Bellanti, C. J., Bierman, K. L., & Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. (1996). The quality of sibling relationships and the development of social competence and behavioral control in aggressive children. *Developmental Psychology*, *32*, 79-89.

Stormshak, E., Bullock, B. M., & Falkenstein, C. A. (2009). Harnessing the power of sibling relationships as a tool for optimizing social-emotional development. In L. Kramer & K. J. Conger (Eds.), *Siblings as agents of socialization*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent*

Development, *126*, 62-78. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Stormshak, E. & Dishion, T. J. (2002). An ecological approach to clinical and counseling psychology. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, *5*, 197-215.

Teti, D. M., & Ablard, K. E., (1989). Security of attachment and infant-sibling relationships: A laboratory study. *Child Development, 60*, 1519-1528.

Tucker, C. J. (2004, April). Sibling shared time: An important context for adolescent well-bring. Presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence, Baltimore.

Tucker, C. J., McHale, S. M., & Crouter, A. C. (2001). Conditions of sibling support in adolescence. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *15*, 254-271.

Updegraff, K. A., McHale, S. M., Whiteman, S. D., Thayer, S. M., & Delgado, M. Y. (2005). Adolescent sibling relationships in Mexican American families: Exploring the role of familism. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *19*, 512-522.

Vaillant, G. E., & Vaillant, C. O. (1990). Natural history of male psychological health, XII: A 45-year study of predictors of successful aging at age 65. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *147*, 31-37.

Vandereycken, W., & Van Vreckem, E. (1992). Siblings as co-patients and co-therapists in the treatment of eating disorders. In F. Boer & J. Dunn (Eds.), *Children's sibling relationships: Developmental and clinical issues* (pp. 109-123). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Webster, D., Shlonsky, A., Shaw, T., & Brookhart, M. A. (2005). The ties that bind II: Reunification for siblings in out-of-home care using a statistical technique for examining non-independent observations. *Children and Youth Service Review, 27*, 765-783.

Weisner, T. S. (1989). Comparing sibling relationships across cultures. In P. G. Zukow (Ed.), *Sibling interaction across cultures: Theoretical and methodological issues* (pp. 11-25). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Whiteman, S. D., Becerra, J. M. & Killoren, S. E. (2009). Mechanisms of sibling socialization in normative family development. In L. Kramer & K. J. Conger (Eds.), *Siblings as agents of socialization*. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, *126*, 29-44. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Whiteman, S. D., McHale, S. M., & Crouter, A. C. (2007). Explaining sibling similarities: Perceptions of sibling influences. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *36*, 963-972.

Zukow-Goldring, P. (2002). Sibling caregiving. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of parenting: Vol. 3. Being and becoming a parent* (2nd ed.) (pp. 253-286). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

This material is based on work supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture Hatch Project No. ILLU-793-357. Any opinions, findings, conclusions or recommendations expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. Please address correspondence to Laurie Kramer, Department of Human and Community Development, University of Illinois or by email: lfkramer@illinois.edu.