Representations of Sibling Relationships in Young Children's Literature

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Children's conceptions of what sibling relationships can be like may be influenced, in part, by the literature they read. This study examined the degree to which positive and negative dimensions of sibling relationships were portrayed in a sample of children's books ($n = 261$). We also investigated how mothers and fathers were depicted when responding to sibling conflict. Results indicated that although children's books often represent warmth and involvement between siblings, they rarely described children engaging in conflict management or relational maintenance activities. Parents were predominantly portrayed as responding to children's conflict using controlling methods rather than techniques that might foster negotiation and problem solving. Characters who were middle children are under-represented in children's literature. Results are discussed in terms of how educators can select, use, and adapt books in their efforts to help strengthen children's sibling relationships.

Parents often use books to teach children about ways to relate with others in their social worlds (Hart, McGee, & Hernandez, 1993). In particular, parents of young children rely heavily on books as a way to prepare young children for becoming siblings (Jalongo & Renck, 1985; Weiss, 1981) and for helping siblings to establish a positive relationship once there are multiple children in the family (Jalongo & Renck, 1985). The fact that so many children are exposed to this genre leads us to ask whether this literature conveys the types of images of sibling relationships that are most conducive to the establishment of positive sibling relationships. Specifically, this study examines the extent to which children are exposed to models of sibling interaction, through literature, that reflect prosocial rather than antagonistic interactions. A second focus of this research examines the extent to which parents are portrayed as using strategies to respond to difficulties

in children's sibling relationships that are considered by researchers to be more versus less effective.

REPRESENTATIONS OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Although little is known about the extent to which children's behavior and attitudes may be shaped by the literature they are exposed to, there is some evidence that supports a connection between these processes. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that children are more likely to develop prosocial behaviors if they are provided with adaptive models (either directly or through media), especially if these models are reinforced for their prosocial acts. In a more direct demonstration of the potential of children's literature, Bhavnagri and Samuels (1996) showed how "high quality" books could be used to facilitate peer relationships among preschool children. On a clinical level, Pardeck and Pardeck (1989, 1993) describe how bibliotherapy can be an effective tool for promoting children's adaptation to a variety of life stressors. Demonstrations such as these suggest that children's literature does have the potential to positively impact children's social and emotional development. Although the connections between children's literature and children's actual interactions with siblings have not yet been studied, it follows logically that children may benefit from books that model ways to achieve and maintain prosocial sibling relationships. Information about children's literature may allow early childhood educators to bolster parents' attempts to promote positive sibling relationships.

The importance of selecting books that convey the type of messages that educators and parents believe are most appropriate and effective is illustrated in recent research by Kramer and Radey (1997). This study showed that unwanted effects may follow from exposing children to literature and videotapes depicting negative sibling interactions. Kramer and Radey developed a social skills training program in which small groups of children were coached in prosocial sibling behaviors. The effects of this program were compared to a control condition in which children were read books and shown videotapes about the introduction of a new child into the family. The books and videotapes that were used were commonly available to families through bookstores, libraries, and video rental stores. Although it was not surprising that children who underwent social skills training were considered by their parents to demonstrate more positive interactions with their sibling than children in the control condition, it was alarming that children who had been exposed to books and videotapes (without social skills training) were perceived to behave more negatively with their sibling over time. One clue as to why this occurred emerged from parents' spontaneous comments about the control condition: parents perceived that exposure to books and videotapes that included even brief portrayals of sibling animosity might heighten (or even create) children's awareness that sibling interactions could consist of negative interpersonal processes such as hostility, aggression, resentment, and jealousy. Accordingly, it may be important to ensure that educators provide children

with books that emphasize ways to achieve prosocial sibling relationships. The purpose of this research is to consider the degree to which positive and negative themes are conveyed in children's books about sibling relationships in order to help educators identify books that portray sibling relationships in the most adaptive ways.

Recent research on children's sibling and peer relationships supports the notion that it is particularly important to encourage the development of prosocial behaviors even if this means devoting less effort toward reducing conflict. This is in direct contrast to previous intervention efforts that were primarily directed toward reducing or eliminating sibling conflict (see Kramer & Baron, 1995 for a brief review). There are several strands of research that support this change in emphasis. First, certain forms of sibling and peer conflict are now understood as serving important functions for children's social and emotional development. For example, experiences with constructive forms of conflict may provide children with opportunities to develop skills in conflict management (DeVries & Zan, 1994; Hartup, Laursen, Stewart, & Eastenson, 1988; Vandell & Bailey, 1992) and identity formation (Shantz & Hobart, 1989), as well as opportunities to increase their capacity for tolerating negative affect (Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992) and for demonstrating social understanding (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992). Thus, efforts that are geared toward eliminating sibling conflict may hamper children's ability to acquire these skills.

Second, although there is an assumption in western society that the foremost problem in children's sibling relationships is that there is too much conflict, there is evidence to suggest that parents are even more concerned about the lack of warmth and involvement among their children. Kramer and Baron (1995) assessed parents' standards or expectations for a "good sibling relationship" and compared these with parents' reports about the quality of their own children's relationship. The largest discrepancies between parents' standards and their observations of their children's actual relationship were in behaviors that reflected warmth and involvement—not conflict or rivalry. Thus, parents may not recognize the degree to which they are concerned about a lack of closeness between their children.

Finally, a third strand of evidence that supports the importance of providing children with positive models of sibling relationships comes from the Kramer and Radey (1997) study. As reviewed above, this study demonstrated that training children to enact social skills that are relevant to sibling interaction can increase warmth, reduce rivalry, help to stabilize levels of agonism and competition, and reduce the status/power differential between siblings.

PARENTS' RESPONSES TO SIBLING STRIFE

A second focus of this study is to understand how parents are represented in children's literature, in particular, with regard to their reactions to sibling conflict. A fair amount of research has been devoted to identifying the child-rearing strategies that are most effective for managing children's sibling conflict. Studies

on family conflict (e.g., Dunn & Munn, 1985, 1986; Vuchinich, Emery, & Cassidy, 1988) and parental disciplinary styles (Baumrind, 1967; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman, 1970; Maccoby & Martin, 1983) suggest that strategies that involve some form of control, authoritarian, or power assertion method (e.g., threats, commands to stop fighting, punishing children for fighting) are, under many circumstances, less effective than strategies that involve induction or reasoning. For example, Kramer, Perozynski, & Chung (in press) showed that the parental use of control strategies typically leads to chains of additional controlling behaviors rather than the resolution of sibling conflict. In contrast, child-centered methods that involve working with children to discuss or work through conflict (e.g., reasoning, exploring feelings, exploring the consequences that a child's action has on another, collaborative problem solving) are more likely to lead to a greater capacity to engage in social understanding (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992; Lollis, Ross, & Leroux, 1996) and to a lowered probability of continued conflict (Kramer et al., in press). Thus, the second research question addressed in this study investigates whether parents are represented in children's literature as responding to conflict in ways that should encourage siblings' use of negotiation and problem solving (e.g., child-centered strategies) as opposed to continued conflict (e.g., parental control strategies and non-intervention).

In summary, this study was intended to address two main questions: (1) Are books for preschoolers and early readers (up to grade 3) about sibling relationships more likely to include positive examples of how to relate with and how to resolve conflicts with their siblings or negative examples of sibling animosity?; and (2) To what degree are parents represented in these as responding to children's conflict in ways that are likely to aid in the siblings' use of negotiation and problem solving strategies? These research questions were addressed by reviewing a large sample of books, designed for preschoolers and early readers, in terms of how the sibling relationship was portrayed and how parents responded to sibling conflict.

METHOD

Procedure

Three main references were used to identify picture books on children's sibling relationships: (1) *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books* (Lima & Lima, 1993); (2) *Subject Guide to Children's Books in Print* (1996); and (3) *The Bookfinder: Annotations of Books Published 1987–1990* (Dreyer, 1994). These sources listed approximately 400 books under the subject headings of sibling relationships, sibling rivalry, sibling love, sibling jealousy, and brothers and sisters. These books were then located and reviewed. Books were retained for analysis if they met the following criteria: (1) were identified by one of the above sources as a picture book or early reader; (2) portrayed an existing sibling relationship rather than an anticipated one; (3) involved characters over 2 years of

age; and (4) could be obtained from a public library, bookstore, or inter-library loan. This process resulted in 261 books being retained for analysis.

Each book was described on the following descriptive dimensions: (1) the gender of the main character; (2) the birth order of the main character (oldest, middle, youngest); (3) whether the main character was human, animal, or other (e.g., a creature from outer space); and (4) whether the sibling relationship was central, secondary, or incidental to the plot of the story.

In addition, the thematic content of the story was described using a newly devised coding system that is grounded in the empirical research on sibling relationships. This coding system evolved from a systematic review of the literature. As shown in Table 1, 30 specific thematic codes that could relate to the depiction of sibling relationships in children's literature were identified. Representative research citations for each of the codes are included in this table. Each book was considered in terms of the presence of each of the 30 thematic codes[1].

The 30 codes were later collapsed into six general categories that reflect current conceptualizations of sibling relationship quality (Stocker, Dunn, & Plomin, 1989). These six categories include: (1) warmth and affection; (2) involvement; (3) conflict management and relationship maintenance; (4) agonism; (5) control, and (6) rivalry/competition. The first three categories were conceptualized as positive types of sibling interaction whereas the last three categories were considered to be negative. We also coded whether both positive and negative themes were incorporated into a single story.

A modification of Washo's (1992) coding system was used to categorize the parental responses to sibling conflict depicted in the books. Instances of parental intervention were coded as: (1) collaborative problem solving (parent works with siblings to reach a mutually acceptable resolution to the conflict); (2) exploration of emotion (parent explores with the siblings how they each feel about the conflict and how their actions have affected one another); (3) active non-intervention (parent relays an expectation to the children that they should resolve the conflict on their own but is available to help if needed); (4) reasoning (parent explains why the children are having a conflict or gives a reason as to why a particular rule should be upheld); (5) power assertion (parent uses authority and power such as threats or punishment to end children's conflict); (6) commands to stop fighting (parent uses persuasive verbal methods in effort to terminate fighting); (7) redirection (parent directs children's attention away from the conflict to a non-conflictual topic or object); or (8) passive non-intervention (a parent ignores or avoids intervening in the conflict). As per Kramer et al. (in press), the first four categories were considered as exemplars of child-centered strategies. Power assertion, commands to stop fighting, and redirection were considered to be control strategies. Passive non-intervention was maintained as a separate category as it involved an absence of interaction with the children. As parents may be depicted as using more than one strategy, a book could be described with multiple codes.

Inter-rater reliability was assessed by having two independent raters code 60 (23%) of the books. Perfect agreement was reached between the raters for coding the gender and birth order of the main character; whether the main character was

Table 1. Positive and Negative Themes of Sibling Interaction

Category	Code	Definition	Representative Research Citation	Number of Books	Percentage
Positive themes					
Warmth/ Affection	Caregiving	Child watches over, protects, and takes charge of sibling	(Stewart & Marvin, 1984)	57	21.84%
	Comforting	Verbal or physical consolation when sibling is distressed	(Abramovitch, Pepler, & Corter, 1982)	47	18.00%
	Helping, Cooperation	Child assists sibling	(Dunn & Kendrick, 1982a,b)	64	24.52%
	Affection	Child shows feelings of affection, love or devotion to sibling	(Vandell, Minnett, & Santrock, 1987)	67	25.67%
	Loyalty	Child shows belief or trust in sibling and sticks up for him/her	(Bank & Kahn, 1982)	18	6.89%
	Pride	Child is proud of or admires sibling	(Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)	25	9.58%
			TOTAL Warmth/Affection	278	
Involvement	Playing	Siblings have fun and amuse themselves	(Kramer & Gottman, 1992)	86	32.95%
	Teaching	Child explains or shows sibling how to do something	(Stewart, 1983)	31	11.88%
	Inclusion	Child makes a point of including sibling in activities	(Hetherington, 1988)	23	8.81%
	Companionship	Sibling are portrayed as companions to one another	(Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)	146	55.94%
			TOTAL Involvement	286	
Conflict Management	Problem Solving	Child and sibling find a solution to a conflict or other difficulty	(Vandell & Bailey, 1992; Cicirelli, 1972)	35	13.41%
	Negotiation, Sharing	Sharing in the service of avoiding or managing conflict	(Shantz & Hobart, 1989)	42	16.09%
	Perspective-taking	Child is able to take the sibling's point of view	(Howe & Ross, 1990)	13	4.98%
	Imagining	Child uses imagination to deal with sibling conflict	(Levy, 1937)	9	3.44%
			TOTAL Conflict Management	99	

Table 1. Continued

Category	Code	Definition	Representative Research Citation	Number of Books	Percentage
Negative Themes					
Agonism	Quarrelling	Sibling disagree and argue	(Phinney, 1986)	37	14.17%
	Anger	Child feels angry at sibling	(Dunn & Munn, 1985)	29	11.11%
	Blaming, Tattling	Child holds sibling responsible for something bad or wrong	(Felson, 1983)	23	8.81%
	Insults, Threats, Disapproval	Child finds fault with, belittles, or devalues sibling	(Abramovitch et al., 1982)	93	35.63%
	Teasing	Child bothers or annoys sibling with persistent provoking	(Prochaska & Prochaska, 1985)	35	13.41%
	Mimicking	Child imitates sibling as a way to taunt or tease	(Dunn & Kendrick, 1982b)	15	5.75%
	Physical Aggression	Child uses physical force against sibling, e.g., hitting, pushing,	(Felson, 1983; Steinmetz, 1978; Patterson, 1986)	28	10.73%
	Loneliness	Child feels sad and alone	(Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984)	32	12.26%
			TOTAL Agonism	292	
Control	Bossiness, Demandingness	Child tells sibling what to do and how to do things; ordering	(Sutton-Smith & Rosenberg, 1968)	67	25.67%
	Exclusion, Avoidance	A child desires to be with sibling but is excluded or parents force inclusion	(Hetherington, 1988)	65	24.90%
	Territoriality, Privacy	Child desires to be alone or keep sibling out of his or her room and away from possessions	(Montemayor & Hanson, 1985)	35	13.41%
			TOTAL Control	167	
Rivalry/ Competition	Negative Comparing	Child points out how the siblings are alike and different using negative tone, bragging	(Shantz & Hobart, 1989)	68	26.05%
	Competing	Child tries to win or gain something wanted by sibling	(Furman & Buhrmester, 1985)	8	3.07%

Table 1. Continued

Category	Code	Definition	Representative Research Citation	Number of Books	Percentage
	Selfishness	Child gives little or no thought to sibling's needs or desires and seeks to maximize own gain	(Freud, 1920)	32	12.26%
	Envy, Jealousy	Child feels discontentment because the sibling has what s/he wants or fears that the sibling is loved more	(Levy, 1937)	27	10.34%
	Differential Treatment	Child thinks parents treat sibling differently than him or herself	(Brody, Stoneman, & McCoy, 1992)	20	7.67%
			TOTAL Rivalry/Competition	155	

human, animal, or other; and whether sibling relationships were central, secondary, or incidental to the story. Inter-rater agreement ranged from 79% to 100% (mean = 91% agreement) for coding the 30 sibling themes and 85% to 100% (mean = 95% agreement) for coding parental responses to sibling conflict.

RESULTS

Descriptive information about the gender and birth order of the main character, the type of character, and the degree of focus on the sibling relationship represented in the books are presented first. This is followed by analyses relevant to the two research questions.

Descriptive Information

Of the 261 books that were reviewed, 102 (39.08%) of the main characters were female and 124 (47.50%) were male. The remaining 35 (13.41%) had no explicit main character. Thus, males were slightly more likely to be represented as main characters.

Of the 226 books that had a main character, 95 (42%) were oldest children, 18 (8%) were middle, and 113 (50%) were youngest children. These results suggest that there is a significant need for more books that portray middle children as main characters. Although most books did not specify the age of the main character, they appeared to parallel the age of the intended reader and ranged from preschool to grade 3.

Humans were portrayed as main characters in the majority of the books ($n =$ 204, 78.16%). Animals were the main characters in almost all of the remaining books ($n =$ 53, 20.31%). The "other" category was generally represented by creatures such as trolls and witches and were the main characters in 4 (1.53%) books. Thus, there appears to be a tendency to portray sibling relationships in more realistic ways by casting humans as main characters.

Sibling relationships were given a central or primary emphasis in 190 (72.8%) of the books. Sibling relationships were coded as secondary in 57 (22%) of the books and were incidental to the plot of the story in only 14 (5.2%) of the books.

Analysis of Positive and Negative Themes of Sibling Interaction

Positive Themes. Approximately 52% of the sibling relationship themes that were identified in the books represented positive dimensions of sibling relationships. Table 1 presents the frequency with which each of the 30 codes were identified in the 261 books. Among the positive dimensions, Table 1 shows that siblings were most often portrayed as companions, as playing together and demonstrating affection, helping, and caregiving.

Relatively few books depicted siblings negotiating or sharing ($n =$ 42, 16.09%) or working together to solve a problem ($n =$ 35, 13.41%). Examples of books that did portray negotiating or sharing include Martha Alexander's (1975) *I'll Be the Horse if You'll Play With Me*, Florence B. Freedman's (1985) *Brothers: A*

Hebrew Legend, and Dale Fife's (1985) *Rosa's Special Garden* [2]. Of the 35 books that portrayed siblings working to solve a problem, only 26 focused on a problem that specifically related to the sibling relationship. The remaining 9 books depicted children working on a problem that stemmed from outside of the relationship (e.g., collaborating on how to unlock a treasure box). Some examples of books that depicted siblings solving a problem together include *The Train to Lulu's* (Howard, 1998), *Slither McCreep and his Brother, Joe* (Jonston, 1992), *Too Hot for Ice Cream* (Van Leeuwen, 1974), *Let's Be Friends Again* (Wilhelm, 1986), and *That's Mine!* (Winthrop, 1977).

Few books ($n = 13$, 4.98%) demonstrated perspective-taking between siblings. Examples of books that depicted perspective-taking include *My Sister's Silent World* (Arthur, 1979), *A Tail of a Different Color* (Anderson, 1992), *My Sister is Different* (Wright, 1981), and *Princess Pooh* (Muldoon, 1989). Most of these books portrayed sibling relationships in which one child had a developmental delay or physical disability. The low number of books depicting perspective-taking indicates that there is a need for additional books in which characters work to solve problems in their relationship or show sensitivity to the feelings, needs, or opinions of their sibling.

Multiple Positive Codes.   Books that were coded as portraying several dimensions of prosocial sibling relationships may be considered as providing children with a relatively richer and multi-faceted picture of positive sibling relationships. Books that were coded as expressing the highest numbers of positive themes included Kathryn Galbraith's (1990) *Roommates* (9 positive codes), Maxine Rosenberg's (1991) *Brothers and Sisters* (8 positive codes), Jean Van Leeuwen's (1974) *Too Hot for Ice Cream* (8 positive codes), Mike Venezia's (1986) *How to Be An Older Brother or Sister* (8 positive codes), Michelle Emmert's (1989) *I'm the Big Sister Now* (7 positive codes), Holly Keller's (1989) *Maxine in the Middle* (7 positive codes), Barbara Samuels' (1985) *Faye and Dolores* (7 positive codes), Debby Slier's (1989) *Brothers and Sisters* (7 positive codes), and Lucia Smith's (1979) *A Special Kind of Sister* (7 positive codes).

Negative Themes.   Approximately 48% of the total number of sibling relationship codes that were assigned were negative. Among these, insults, threats, and disapproval were represented most often, followed by negative comparisons in which siblings identified how they were similar to and different from one another (see Table 1). Bossiness and excluding or avoiding siblings were also common themes.

Positive and Negative Themes.   Table 2 presents the frequencies of the 30 codes when they were collapsed into the six broader categories of positive and negative themes. These data reinforce the earlier finding that conflict management and relational maintenance processes are only rarely illustrated in children's books. In contrast, there are many more books that depict positive engagement between siblings. Thus, although children's literature often demonstrates how siblings can be involved with one another and can be caring, affectionate, and

Table 2. Summary of Sibling Relationship Themes Identified in Children's Books (*n* = 261 books)

	Frequency	Percent of Total Themes
Positive Themes		
Warmth/Affection	278	21.68%
Involvement	286	22.31%
Conflict Management	99	7.72%
Total Positive	663	51.72%
Negative Themes		
Agonism	292	22.78%
Control	172	13.42%
Rivalry/Competition	155	12.09%
Total Negative	619	48.28%

warm, children are rarely provided with demonstrations of conflict management and relationship maintenance activities.

The analysis of negative sibling relationship themes (Table 2) reveals that agonism (e.g., insults, arguing, teasing, loneliness) between siblings was more likely to be depicted than sibling control or rivalry/competition.

The Incorporation of Both Positive and Negative Themes. Approximately 70% (*n* = 184) of the books contained both positive and negative themes. It was typical for these stories to first portray some negative feature(s) of a sibling, or a conflict between siblings, followed by some event by which the main characters came to love, value, or appreciate their sibling. Examples of books that incorporated both positive and negative themes include Barbara Bottner's (1977) *Jungle Day or How I Learned to Love My Nosey Brother*, Nancy Carlson's (1982) *Harriet and Walt*, and Susan Pearson's (1979) *Molly Moves Out*.

It was rare for books to portray only negative themes (*n* = 31, 12%). Books that fell into this category include Judy Blume's (1974) *The Pain and the Great One* and Charlotte Zolotow's (1986) *Timothy, Too!* The remaining 46 books (18%), such as Deborah DeSaix's (1993) *In the Back Seat* and Jo Prall's (1985) *My Sister's Special,* contained only positive themes. Thus, the majority of the books portrayed the ambivalent feelings that are common in sibling relationships (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982b).

Parental Responses to Sibling Conflict

Approximately 75% (*n* = 197) of the 261 books involved plots in which parents were not an integral part of the story. In the remaining 64 books, only 20 (31.25%) portrayed parents using a child-centered strategy to respond to conflict (see Table 3). The child-centered strategy that was most commonly depicted was explaining or reasoning about the rules about fighting or children's behavior (*n* =

Table 3.   Summary of Parent Responses to Sibling Conflict Identified in Children's Books ($n = 64$ books)

Parent Responses to Sibling Conflict	Number of Books	Percentage
Child-centered Strategies		
Collaborative Problem solving	1	1.56%
Exploration of Emotion	2	3.13%
Active Non-intervention	3	4.69%
Explaining	14	21.88%
Total	20	
Authoritarian Strategies		
Power Assertion	18	28.13%
Commands to Stop Fighting	19	29.69%
Redirection	6	9.38%
Total	43	
Non-intervention		
Passive Non-intervention	1	1.56%
Total	1	1.56%

14, 21.88%). Examples of these books include Judy Blume's (1981) *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo,* Crescent Dragonwagon's (1989) *I Hate My Sister Maggie*, and Angela Johnson's (1991) *One of Three*. Three books (4.69%) exemplified active non-intervention: *Jill the Pill* (Julie Castiglia, 1979), *Monnie Hates Lydia* (Susan Pearson, 1975), and *That's Exactly the Way it Wasn't* (James Stevenson, 1991). Only two books (3.13%) portrayed parents who specifically encouraged their children to talk about their feelings. These were Barbara Hazen's (1979) *If It Weren't for Benjamin* and Paula Z. Hogan's (1980) *Sometimes I Get So Mad*. Only one book (1.56%) described a parent helping the children to solve their problem collaboratively: Judith Vigna's (1990) *My Big Sister Takes Drugs*. Thus, there is a clear need for more children's books that model different ways that parents can help children explore their feelings and work to solve problems together.

   The majority of children's books ($n = 43$, 67.19%) portrayed parents who intervened in children's conflict by using a controlling strategy. The control strategies that were depicted most commonly were commands to stop fighting ($n = 19$, 29.69%) and power assertion ($n = 18$, 28.13%). Examples of books showing parents commanding children to stop fighting include *Thump and Plunk* (Janice Udry, 1980), *Maxine in the Middle* (Holly Keller, 1989), and *Harvey's Hideout* (Russell Hoban, 1969). Books that portrayed parents using power assertion to end sibling conflicts included *Big Sisters are Bad Witches* (Morse Hamilton, 1981), *Moontiger* (Phyllis Root, 1985), and *The Twins Strike Back* (Valerie Flournoy, 1980). Relatively few parents were portrayed diffusing conflict through redirection or distraction ($n = 6$, 9.38%). Examples of books that included parental redirection of sibling conflict were *Brothers are All the Same* (Mary Milgram, 1978) and *Fred's First Day* (Cathy Warren, 1984).

As shown in Table 3, passive non-intervention was very rarely depicted. It was unusual for authors to include a parent as a main character and then have that parent refrain from intervening in conflict. The one book that showed a clear example of parental non-intervention was Barbara William's (1976) *Donna Jean's Disaster*.

DISCUSSION

There are many reasons why young children and their parents read books together—for fun, to share a peaceful moment, to promote an appreciation of literature and the act of reading, and to introduce new ideas and information. Although children and their parents may not purposely read books to promote knowledge in a specific area, the potential still exists for them to learn from the experience.

Griffin (1984) and Pardeck and Pardeck (1989, 1993) suggest that books can serve a variety of functions, some of which may be therapeutic. Books can provide information and stimulate discussion about a problem, create an awareness that others also experience this problem, suggest alternate values and attitudes that relate to the problem, and outline potential solutions. The literature for children on sibling relationships appears to fulfill many of these functions. For example, by reading about other sibling relationships, children can learn that their feelings are not abnormal and that there is hope for finding more acceptable ways to relate to one another. Through literature, children may come to identify with literary characters who are experiencing problems similar to their own. As the plot unfolds and the characters resolve the issues at hand, children may gain new insight about their problem and learn about different strategies that may be applied to their own situation (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1993). As discussed above, little is currently known about the degree to which exposing children to literature leads them to change their behavior and attitudes. However, given the potential for learning and behavior change, it is important for educators to be aware of the qualities of children's books that may be most helpful for demonstrating prosocial sibling behavior.

The findings of this study help to advance our limited knowledge of what children understand about sibling relationships from their exposure to literature. Through its identification of a set of empirically based categories that describe various dimensions of children's sibling relationships, as well as parents' role in facilitating sibling relationships, educators now have a guide for selecting books that convey particular themes. This taxonomy may be useful for developing prevention or intervention programs that strategically use children's literature to promote prosocial sibling relationships. In addition, this research provides information about the frequency with which pertinent themes are represented in children's literature on sibling relationships, thereby highlighting the need for additional books that address important but under-represented themes. Below, we discuss some specific implications of the results.

Representations of Sibling Relationships

The results of the current study suggest that children's literature that is focused on sibling relationships tends to represent positive and negative dimensions of these relationships to equivalent degrees. It was reassuring to see that positive sibling relationship processes such as warmth, affection, and involvement were relatively common. Although negative interpersonal processes such as insults, bossiness, and negative comparisons between siblings were also typical, virtually all stories ended on a positive note.

It was also notable that the majority of books incorporated both positive and negative themes. Most commonly, the author laid out a conflict or problem between or among siblings (and in so doing portrayed the negative interpersonal processes). The establishment of conflict was typically followed by some transforming event that led the main character to change his or her perspective and come to love, value, or appreciate the sibling. Although no story ended with the sibling relationship in a negative state, the literary device of creating a conflict to be resolved did the very thing that some parents in the Kramer and Radey (1997) intervention study were concerned about: it portrayed in vivid detail ways that children may fight, insult, and/or devalue their siblings. Thus, educators may want to consider the degree to which they want to expose children to negative images of sibling relationships before a positive outcome is reached.

Several themes that have been identified by developmental researchers as hallmark processes in children's sibling relationships (see Table 1) were under-represented in the children's books on sibling relationships we examined. These under-represented themes include perspective-taking, the use of imagination to solve conflicts with a sibling, conflict management, and problem solving. The paucity of stories that illustrate conflict management and relationship maintenance issues is a critical oversight given that conflict and low levels of warmth are quite prevalent in children's sibling relationships. Although it would be marvelous if educators would write books that target these areas, this is not feasible for most. Instead, educators may want to make a specific point of adding to their libraries the relatively few books that do illustrate specific mechanisms for managing conflicts. In addition, educators may also want to add opportunities to discuss conflict management and relational maintenance issues with children when they use books that do not fully illustrate these processes. For example, educators can discuss with children how other strategies could also have been used by the book's characters to produce positive outcomes. Study guides could be created for some of the more popular books to structure these discussions.

The analysis of the types of characters portrayed in children's literature on sibling relationships revealed some interesting findings. First, it was notable that the majority of books about sibling relationships cast humans as the main characters. The authors of these books may have felt that it is important to make stories as realistic to children as possible, perhaps to help them better appreciate the "take-home message" of the story and apply it to their own situation.

Second, although almost equal attention was given to male and female characters in the books we reviewed, characters who were middle children were

severely under-represented. This is quite unfortunate as many middle children report being overlooked in their families. Thus, it may be especially important to provide middle children with books that include characters who model innovative responses to problems such as receiving inadequate attention from parents relative to siblings, feelings of loneliness, and being excluded from activities. If educators find it difficult to obtain such books, they can try to adapt stories that they do have to address this issue. For example, when reading books involving only two child characters, children could be asked to imagine that there was a middle child in the family and to explore the situation from this child's perspective.

Representations of Parents

Parents were portrayed as using controlling or authoritarian methods to respond to conflict between siblings in the majority of cases (67%) where parents were included in the story. This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, power assertive strategies have generally been found to be less effective than approaches that use reasoning or induction, particularly when used in isolation (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman, 1970; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Second, demonstrations of child-centered approaches (which do involve reasoning and induction) are severely under-represented in children's books. In particular, collaborative problem solving and the exploration of emotion, which both may be effective strategies (Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992; Kramer et al., in press), are shown only rarely. Thus, not only is there a need for more books that demonstrate innovative ways for children to manage conflicts with their sibling, books that portray parents effectively responding to their children's conflicts are also needed.

An underlying premise of this discussion is that parents may learn new strategies about raising their children while reading children's books. To be clear, little research exists that demonstrates that parents derive (or fail to derive) information from reading children's literature. However, this notion is consistent with social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), which posits that individuals may learn vicariously from exposure to all forms of stimuli. Given that parents often read picture books with young children, it is logical that this literature can potentially educate parents about different methods of promoting positive relationships among their children. Accordingly, it would be most useful if children's literature presents parents with effective models of how to do this. Thus, whenever possible, educators should select books that demonstrate effective parental conflict management strategies such as collaborative problem solving and the exploration of emotion. Reading lists that include these books could be developed for parents. The type of parental conflict management strategy illustrated in each book could be highlighted on the hand-out. When such books are unavailable, educators can augment, adapt, or modify existing materials so that parents are provided with a fuller picture of potentially effective conflict management strategies. For example, educators could target a small set of children's books and explore with parents how the characters in parental roles could have responded differently to sibling conflict to obtain a better outcome. Finally, educators can

provide parents with hand-outs that outline various conflict management strategies and provide information about their effectiveness.

Additional Educational Implications

Although this study has emphasized the content and selection of books, it is also important to address *how* books are used. If children are to assimilate key information, it may be critical to augment the literary experience by including opportunities for active learning such as discussion or practicing new or underdeveloped relationship skills. Pardeck and Pardeck (1993) suggest that to derive full benefit, the reading of a story should be followed with discussion and activities that are selected to foster better understanding of the main message of the story or the adoption of new behavior patterns. Appropriate activities may include art activities, role-playing, or creative writing (for older children).

Bhavnagri and Samuels (1996) provide an excellent example of how to use books as a foundation for helping children to develop positive peer behaviors. Bhavnagri and Samuels selected a set of 15 "high quality" children's books that portrayed key peer interaction concepts. The books were presented to 22 preschoolers at least twice over the course of one year. After listening to each story, the children were led in a discussion about effective strategies for enhancing peer relationships. Finally, the preschoolers engaged in activities that involved practicing the specific social skills that had been presented in the book. Results indicated that the experimental group made significant gains in generating effective strategies for solving hypothetical peer relationship problems on a social knowledge interview in comparison to a control group, which simply heard stories that were unrelated to peer relationships. This is an excellent procedure that could easily be applied to teaching children skills that may help improve the quality of their sibling relationships. Future research should evaluate whether sibling relationship quality is enhanced following the use of this method, as was the case with peer relationships.

Complementary strategies can be used to impart information to parents about how to most effectively respond to sibling conflict. For example, in the context of parent education workshops or individual consultations with parents, parents could be shown samples of the literature that is being shared with their children. In addition to pointing out the positive features of sibling interaction that the educator is highlighting to the children, parents' attention can also be directed to how the parent character in the book facilitates prosocial sibling behaviors and responds to conflict. A conversation such as this could be used as an entree for parents to discuss any difficulties they are having managing their children's sibling relationships. Furthermore, the educator can use this conversation to introduce research-based information about the differential effectiveness of parental conflict management strategies.

Finally, it is important to recognize that books, even when supplemented by these opportunities to integrate new behaviors, feelings, and/or ideas, may not be sufficient to meet some children's needs. For example, a referral to a mental health provider may be necessary if a child demonstrates aggressive or violent

behavior, depressed or significantly withdrawn behavior, or other behaviors that are of concern to parents or educators. Another caveat associated with this research is that the results were derived exclusively from books for preschoolers and early readers with a specific focus on sibling relationships. Sibling and parent-child relationships may also be portrayed in books on other topics. However, an examination of those books was beyond the scope of this study.

In summary, children's books offer opportunities to impart knowledge about ways to facilitate positive sibling relationships. This review suggests that although additional books that portray effective methods for conflict management and relationship maintenance among siblings are needed, there are a number of ways that educators can use existing resources to promote prosocial sibling relationships. Future research should directly assess what children learn through their experiences with books about sibling relationships and whether this knowledge has an impact on the quality of the relationships they develop with their sisters and brothers.

NOTES

1. A comprehensive listing of the codes given to each of the 261 books is available from the first author.
2. Exemplar books were selected at random from the subsample of books that received a particular code.

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