

## Sibling Relationship Contributions to Individual and Family Well-Being: Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue presents new findings that illustrate the ways in which sibling relationships serve as important contexts for individual development and family functioning. This collection of articles, which emphasizes effects on both normative and at-risk development, is intended to stimulate further research on the multifaceted and often contradictory contributions siblings extend to one another across the life course.

The sibling world—the life that children create with their sisters and brothers that extends over the life course—is a largely untapped resource for understanding how individuals develop and families function. In comparison to other family relationships, such as parent–child and marital relations, the contributions of sibling relationships to individual development and family functioning have been given scant attention. Yet a growing body of research is emerging that illustrates the many ways in which human development and the quality of life is impacted by relationships with siblings. After all, it is our brothers and sisters who see us as no one else does, who are experts at how to both please and annoy us, and who bring out the best and worst in us. Although not always providing a logical and consistent view of what transpires in families, the sibling world provides a critical window for understanding the ways in which children's experiences with their brothers and sisters may foreshadow variations in individual well-being and adjustment later in childhood, adolescence, and well into adulthood.

The objective of this special issue is to highlight new findings that illustrate the ways in which sibling relationships

serve as important contexts for both individual development and family functioning. One major impetus for this issue was the provocative finding that pronounced sibling conflict in middle childhood is a robust predictor of later deviance, delinquency, and other behavior problems in late adolescence and early adulthood (Bank, Patterson, & Reid, 1996; Patterson, 1982; Richman, Stevenson, & Graham, 1982). To shed light on these processes, we wanted to find answers to several questions: What sibling relationship dynamics are most important in predicting poor outcomes, such as substance use, delinquency, teen pregnancy, depression, and relationship disruption? Are some types of families more vulnerable to these adverse effects than others? To what extent does growing up with a sibling who engages in deviant behaviors increase the odds that siblings will be at risk? We were excited to find that indeed a number of researchers are examining many of these particular processes, and we devote a full section to these studies.

If poor sibling relationships early in life predict adverse outcomes, this may mean that harmonious relationships early in life may serve as protective factors, setting the stage for positive developmental and relationship outcomes in adulthood. This led us to ask the following: Which sibling groups are more likely to experience supportive relationships and why? How do we stack the deck so that more positive outcomes emerge? Which sibling dynamics are most likely to contribute to a capacity to form meaningful relationships with others? We are excited to present the results of several longitudinal studies that draw connections between early social competencies with siblings and peers and positive adjustment later in development. In this issue, a set of studies examines the prosocial side of sibling relationships and their potential to support healthy development.

We note that much of the extant research often falls on either side of this dialectic, either examining how sibling relationships serve as potential training grounds for deviant behaviors and relational difficulties or as contexts for healthy development and relational functioning.

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We thank everyone who submitted articles and provided reviews for this issue. The entire process, which was inspired by a small but vibrant network of sibling researchers, eventually involved several hundred scholars from numerous institutions and nations. We also extend our heartfelt thanks to Anne Kazak, the *Journal of Family Psychology* editor, and to Carmen Akins, the *Journal of Family Psychology* office and manuscript manager. For 2 years, both Anne and Carmen have provided unwavering guidance and support.

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Rarely do studies address both sides of this issue. Clearly, a balance is needed in which we acknowledge the multifaceted, and often contradictory, contributions siblings offer to one another. After all, the sibling who teaches a child to tie his shoes or unlock a locker may be the same individual who gives this child a first cigarette or beer. Just as we learned from the study of peer relationships that conflict is not always bad—that children learn competencies from the experience of conflict and its management that they might not learn in its absence—understanding the ways that both harmony and disharmony in sibling relationships contribute to children's socioemotional development advances the field. It would be useful to ascertain what kind of balance between these two forces leads to the healthiest development. In addition, we need to know whether different balances are normative for siblings coming from diverse family, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The articles in this special issue inform this perspective and provide significant implications for practice, stimulating prevention and intervention efforts as well as policy development.

A related goal of the special issue is to promote empirical and theoretical interest in sibling relationships by providing researchers with excellent models of how to conduct research with complex family systems. We believe that one reason that sibling relationships have been understudied is because they are very challenging relationships to investigate and that existing theoretical and methodological models have had pronounced shortcomings. However, recent methodological advancements such as hierarchical multilevel modeling, when applied to sibling relationships, give us the opportunity to simultaneously sample a range of developmental variables within and across families. When used in expanded growth models, this approach is powerful for understanding the progression of human development over time. These modeling methods enable researchers, for the first time, to simultaneously examine multiple sibling dyads in the same family. Research that is limited to the study of only two siblings per family (when more siblings exist) may be a trend of the past. In addition, newer behavioral genetic frameworks allow researchers to use sibling relationships to assess how environmental factors mediate genetic influences by comparing and contrasting siblings with varying degrees of genetic relatedness. Thus, as represented in this issue, sibling investigations provide methodological leverage in ways that often go unappreciated but that can expand our understanding of basic processes in human development.

It is our hope that the studies in this special issue will serve as one foundation for the next rounds of investigations of the development and trajectories of children's relationships from childhood through adolescence and into early adulthood. Many factors are addressed in these studies, including normative versus at-risk development; the roles of parents, siblings, and peers in children's and adolescents' development; as well as the measurement

and statistical approaches that are useful in investigating these various themes. As a result of the wealth of theories and hypotheses tested and approaches used to conduct these tests, we have included for this volume a table of 17 critical elements included in these sibling studies and a "road map" for readers to locate articles studying each of these phenomena (see Table 1). Across the top of Table 1 are a variety of significant factors addressed in one or more articles in this special issue. The articles are grouped along the left margin as studies of normative versus at-risk development, and the presence of each factor is indicated. For example, looking down the first column of Table 1, one can see that seven studies included comparisons or interrelations of sibling and peer relationships, and observing column two, six studies included minority samples of sufficient size to conduct statistical analyses regarding at least one non-European American group. Ten studies included longitudinal data, but only two used an experimental manipulation. Note that seven studies measured interaction patterns of multiple dyads such as parent-child, sibling-sibling, and sibling-peer, and five investigators calculated interaction effects for combinations of parent, sibling, or peer contributions to outcome variance.

We are particularly enthusiastic about the volume and quality of manuscripts submitted for this special issue. We find it noteworthy that many of these studies include ethnically diverse samples that are increasingly representative of all families living in North America, not just European American families. Also noteworthy is that the majority of studies in this special issue have used statistical modeling techniques to more accurately test hypotheses and alternative explanations of phenomena under investigation. There were many manuscripts representing exciting areas of research that we were not able to include because of space constraints, but we believe the studies in this issue are a good representation of sibling research efforts today. We hope that investigators will use this special issue as a substantive and methodological springboard to inspire future, even stronger research.

Judy Dunn has prepared an excellent commentary for this special issue. In distilling the basic themes that cut across these articles, she illustrates how the study of sibling relationships has evolved over the past 15 years. As Judy states, there is now no doubt that sibling relationships are important. In her view, the current collection illustrates the sophistication with which researchers can now investigate children's social worlds in ways that capture the complexity of lives both within and outside the family and allow us to predict various aspects of deviance and healthy development. Her call for research that specifically addresses the relational dynamics of sibling relationships by taking advantage of new methodological options is clear and compelling and should serve to stimulate new contributions to the field.

It has been a privilege to serve as guest editors for this special issue.



Table 1

*The Siblings Special Issue Articles Categorized by Normative Versus At-Risk and High-Risk Development, Study Focus, and Key Components*

Study	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Normative																	
Howe & Recchia			X	X						X					X		
Jenkins, Dunn, et al.						X					X	X	X				X
Kramer & Kowal	X			X							X		X		X	X	
McElwain & Volling	X		X	X									X	X			
Pike, Coldwell, & Dunn				X									X			X	X
Richmond, Stocker, & Rienks				X		X					X						X
Updegraff, McHale, et al.		X	X	X													X
Volling												X					X
At risk																	
Criss & Shaw	X	X	X								X			X	X	X	X
East & Toon Khoo		X	X	X					X		X						X
Feinberg, Reiss, & Hetherington			X			X		X					X	X	X	X	X
Hamilton-Giachritsis & Browne						X											
Lobato, Kao, & Plante		X			X												
Miller Brotman, Dawson-McClure, et al.	X	X	X							X	X					X	X
Pomery, Gibbons, et al.	X	X	X	X					X		X			X			X
Rende, Slomkowski, & Lloyd-Richardson	X							X	X		X	X					X
Shebloski, Conger, & Widaman				X		X						X	X		X	X	X
Snyder, Bank, & Burraston	X		X	X					X		X		X	X	X	X	X

*Note.* Each column number corresponds to a key component or focus in each study. The following is a key to the table columns and the corresponding study components:

1. Sibling and peers
2. Ethnically diverse
3. Sibling gender as a study factor
4. Younger versus older sibling outcomes
5. Chronic illness or disability
6. Differential treatment
7. Child maltreatment
8. Measurement of genetic components
9. Alcohol and substance use outcomes
10. Experimental manipulation
11. Longitudinal data
12. Theoretical or methodological focus
13. Measurement of multiple dyads
14. Interactions of parent, sibling, peer
15. Observational measurement
16. Multiagent or multimethod methodologies
17. Statistical modeling

## References

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- Patterson, G. R. (1982). *A social learning approach. Vol. 3. Coercive family process*. Eugene, OR: Castalia.
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