

Child Behavior: Role and Influence of Siblings

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Abstract Objective: The sibling relationship is one of the most unique relationships and is characterized and symbolized by both love and rivalry. Although siblings are a fixture of family life, research on sibling relationships lags behind as compared to other family relationships. This literature documents siblings' essentiality in family life, the significance of siblings for child development and adjustment. **Materials and methods:** An in depth literature search has been carried out in various Electronic Databases like MEDLINE, PubMed, Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar etc., since 2000 to 2023 using suitable key words like sibling influence, sibling relations, family processes, sibling studies to obtain eligible studies. **Results:** A total of 60 articles were reviewed in which only 32 articles met the inclusion criteria. The results indicate that siblings held a very important role in the development and adjustment of children with their environment and themselves too. **Conclusion:** Sibling influences emerge not only in the context of emotionally intense interactions but also exhibited by siblings' role in larger family system dynamics. Their role has been relatively neglected by family scholars, psychologists, social researchers and by those who study close relationships, even though siblings are building blocks of family structure and basis of foundation in family dynamics. Integrating study of siblings and their influence on childhood behavior into family research provides novel insights into the operation of families as a social unit.

Keywords: sibling influence, sibling relations, family processes, sibling studies

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1. Introduction

Siblings are a fixture in the family lives of children, and exhibits a panoramic arena of role in one another's everyday experiences as companions, confidantes, combatants, and as the basis of social comparisons. Research on sibling relationships have been conducted with an aim to find the factors that explain social dynamics between siblings and scrutinizing the role of sibling experiences in youth development and their wellbeing. [1] From this literature review we are aware that sibling relationships are moulded by factors extending from child characteristics to cultural norms and values. Researches have concluded that siblings can have direct effects on one another's development when they serve as social partners, role models, and that siblings can influence one another indirectly by virtue of their impact on larger family dynamics—such as by serving as building blocks of the family structure, holding a favoured family niche, or diluting family resources. [2]

The sibling relationship is likely to last longer than any other relationship in one's lifetime and plays an important role in children's and adolescents' psychosocial development. [3] Siblings are essential social agents in the consumer socialization of children and adolescents and

significantly influence their childhood behavior. Sibling relationships are more or less similar yet different from peer relationships or parent-child relationships in some aspects. Sibling relationships are not discretionary and are eventually not symmetrical because of the age-gap between siblings, the sex of the siblings, etc. [4] The similarity between peer relationships and sibling relationships is in closeness and familiarity. This is essentially true in early and middle childhood. Closeness, intimacy, high quantity of interaction, similar needs and interests indicate the reciprocal nature of the sibling relationship. [5,6]

Till date, results from studies on the role of siblings on Early Child Development (ECD) have been inconclusive. On the one hand, some studies concluded that increased family size has an adverse impact on the welfare of children, especially concerning their educational attainment. These studies mainly took a resource competition perspective and suggested that the presence of siblings reduced the expenditure on each child, moreover parents' time and energy [7]. On the other hand, more recently, some researchers have recognized the value of peer companionships. In other words, with the importance of peer interaction in boosting socioemotional development being increasingly accentuated, siblings have been advocated as the closest, and the earliest, peers for young children. Corroborating with this perspective,

empirical studies have reported that children benefit from a sibling companion in their developmental process [8]. That is, as compared with children without siblings, those with siblings are liable to have less internalizing and externalizing psychosocial problems.

In the face of their ubiquity and potential to influence the childhood behavior, however, sibling relationships have relatively been neglected by researchers studying factors affecting childhood psychiatric disorder and by family scholars, in particular. Given their relative neglect, the overarching goal of this article is to stimulate interest of family scholars in sibling relationships by portraying the centrality of siblings in family life and sibling influences on child and adolescent development. [4,7] In so doing we also aim to illuminate the ways in which the study of sibling relationships and dynamics can inform our understanding of how families operate as social and socializing systems. In addition to this it should be well noted that the data above mentioned is from Western Countries, yet the role of siblings and their influence on is particularly worth studying India. [7]

2. Objective

Throughout our review, we strive to highlight congruities as well as distinctions among convictions and to encapsulate how they may be applied in complementary ways to advance understanding of the influence that siblings on the childhood behavior. The literature review was done with aims of:

1. How family plays an important role in determining relationship between siblings
2. Effect of sibling characteristics and how they instigate overall development

Our review is divided into three sections. The first section focusses on how the family plays a predominant role in the relationship shared by the siblings. In second and third section we focus on how sibling characteristics are instrumental in determining the sibling's relationships and how they instigate overall development and adjustment in all aspects.

3. Search Strategy

Electronic databases like MEDLINE, PubMed, Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar since 2000 were searched using a combination of search terms such as "sibling influence" OR "sibling relations" OR "family processes" OR "sibling studies". The articles were screened to find eligible articles as per the inclusion criteria and then assessed full-text for eligible articles.

4. Inclusion Criteria

All studies which had full text version available
 All studies available in English text
 Studies available from the year 2000-2023.
 Studies done with children in the age group of 3-15 years.

5. Exclusion Criteria

Same studies that were found on different electronic databases.

Studies done before the year 2000 were excluded

Studies conducted on population with single/ divorced/ separated parents.

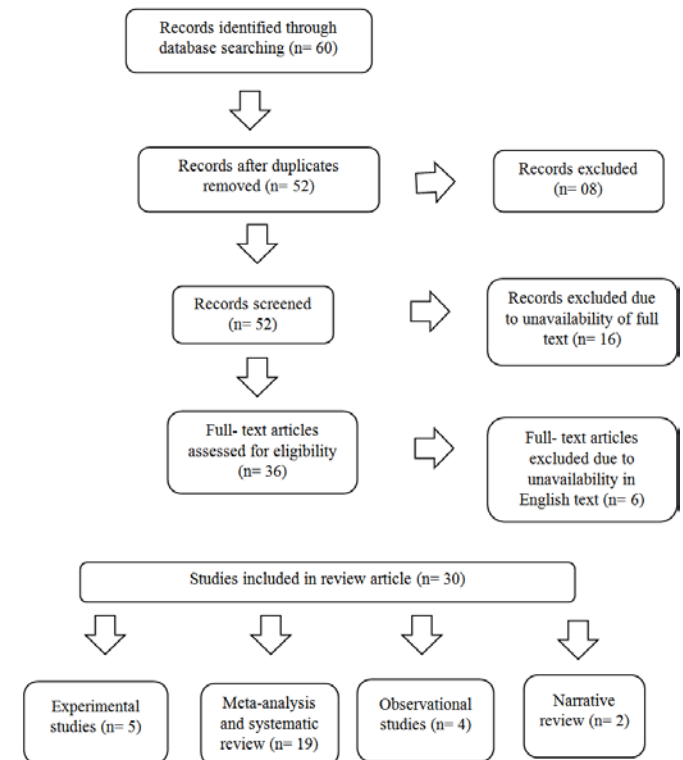


Figure 1. Schematic representation of search strategy for literature review

6. Results

Role of Family in determining Sibling Relationship

Studying how sibling relationships are fixated in the roots of families, advances our understanding of both sibling relationships and families as social systems. A brief review of few articles is depicted in Table 1. Although not traditionally applied to study of sibling relationships, but the interdependence between the family sub systems provides an overarching evidence stating how marital and parental relations affect sibling relationships. [9] With reference to the importance that siblings have in family subsystems few studies have stated that their relationships have a positive influence on the family decisions. [1] Accumulative researches also suggest that during family crises, sibling bonds take on great importance, with siblings possibly functioning as attachment figures for one another. [10] They tend to be a support system for each other as well as for the family members.

Another notable aspect to be discussed in this section is how parental hostility and disequilibrium in the family system as a whole could affect the upbringing of the children. [11] Findings have generally been congruous with a spill over process, meaning that hostility and conflict between the parents and negativity in parent –

child relationships are linked to conflict and violence existing between the siblings. Negativity in the parent – child relationship has also shown to arbitrate links between parental and sibling subsystem dynamics. [12] Some youth may compensate for family negativity (e.g., in their parents' marriage), through the warmth between siblings which help buffer against the negative effects of parental hostility. [13]

The influence that family subsystems have on sibling relationship can also be studied via father's and mother's differential treatment of siblings. [14] Differential treatment (DT) done by parents is a common family dynamic and is associated with child adjustment problems and troubled family relationships. [15,16] This work suggests that incongruousness between mothers' and fathers' differential treatment, meaning that one parent shows preferential treatment toward one sibling and the other does not, may mark a parent – child disintegration or breakdown in co-parenting that is associated with negative sibling and marital dynamics and eventually leading to maladjustment between both siblings. This work also exemplifies how including siblings in research on families allows researchers to capture novel dynamics and illuminate how families operate as systems.

Characteristics of sibling that shape relationship between siblings

The companionship of siblings shared daily in childhood and the lifelong nature of sibling bonds, combined with the intense positive as well as negative emotional nature of sibling exchanges, yield a family relationship whose potentiality and importance has been often underestimated by developmental and family scholars. [13] Early research on structural factors inferred social processes from status characteristics such as gender constellation and age spacing, that helped in understanding sibling characteristics which played an important role in sibling dyad. Family structure plays an important role in defining childhood behavior, but the association between the characteristics of child with sibling relationship is not properly defined. The aim of this literature review was to study how child characteristics play a role in defining sibling relationships.

Sibling relationships are defined by a range of structural features, e.g., gender constellation, age spacing, and biological relatedness as well as the dyad's place in the overall family constellation of siblings. [1] Few studies have documented gender differences in relationship quality. In general, they found that sister-sister dyad tends to be the most intimate, and that dyads that include a brother may be more conflictual than other dyads. [17] Some of the previous evidence has also indicated that the age gap between siblings has influenced the sibling effect on children's developmental outcomes. [18] Additionally, other factors reported in previous studies, including sex, location of registered residency of the child, mother's educational attainment, annual household income, primary caregiver, parental marital status, and parent-child interaction, likely all influence sibling relationship. [19,20,21]

In the mean-time it shall be noted that, the birth order of the child also defines the biological and social environment in which they will be exposed. The environmental as well as biological differences between children in the same

family (called "non-shared environment") represent the major source of environmental variance for personality, psychopathology, and other cognitive abilities. [22] There is evidence suggesting that children would have a worse emotional state and increasing behavior problems after the birth of a sibling as compared to the state before the birth of a sibling. [23] Few studies concluded by saying that the first-born's adjustment may not be as disruptive as traditionally believed, and as they get to the adolescent period may present with a better Early Child Development (ECD) as compared to the later born. [24,25] Even though there is evidence of the first born having better ECD yet it has to be proved the factors determining such difference between the first and later- born. Our review has found some notable findings and depicted in Table 2.

Role of Sibling in Development and Adjustment of Children

Positive sibling relationships are an important source of support for children experiencing stressful life events. [26] Siblings are, of course, not the only influence on child's overall development of coercive behavioral repertoire. Conduct problems including internalizing and externalizing behavior, substance use, parents and peers are also strong influences. In this section we discuss how siblings influence each other on development and adjustment. We have primarily focussed on how they affect each other directly through day to day interactions rather than indirectly affecting each other by playing a role in building blocks in family structure and subsystem etc and tabulated some of the findings in Table 3.

➤ Direct Influence

An extensive contact outside the parental and societal control, the siblings have a very potential effect on each other's life in giving a direction to the development and adjustment with problems occurring in the course of life. Even though siblings may have individual conflict and differences, they can develop skills in perspective taking, emotion understanding, negotiation, persuasion, and problem solving. [27] Sibling relationship even moderated the effects of stressful life events on internalizing symptoms while having no effects on externalizing problems. [28]

➤ Indirect Influence

Mostly researchers focus on direct influence of siblings on each other, here we try to include evidence on how they affect each other even indirectly. During a family crisis, younger siblings may tend to follow the foot-steps of the elder sibling. The elder one may become an attachment figure for the younger ones. [29] Children are predisposed to imitate what other do, so they often end up imitating either parents or their siblings. Sometimes the siblings may not always have a positive impact on the other child. There are evidences suggesting that a key family dynamic that influences sibling relationships is parental differential treatment (PDT). Children are sensitive to PDT and report that it occurs frequently in the course of time. PDT is linked to less positive sibling relationships from early childhood through adolescence. [15] The negative implications of differential treatment by parents, however impacts the sibling relationships, not surprisingly, sibling relationship qualities getting dislodged to a range of individual outcomes, including

depression, identity and self-esteem, aggression, delinquency, school adjustment and achievement, peer and romantic relationships, and substance use and other health risk behaviours in childhood and adolescence. [29,30]

Interestingly, there are studies with evidences on how siblings also affect the physiological characteristics of the child such as body weight. Having fewer or no siblings was associated with decreased physical activity,

inadequate sleep, and unhealthy dietary habits. The relationship between the number of siblings and childhood obesity persisted over time. [31] Though our review due to limited sources has not been able to focus on this aspect much, there is an increasing demand to focus on the benefits and demerits of having siblings in association with physical characteristics of child.

Table 1. Role of Family in determining Sibling Relationship

AUTHOR OF RESEARCH ARTICLE YEAR OF PUBLICATION	TITLE OF THE STUDY	METHODOLOGY	FINDINGS	COMMENTS
Family Influences on Sibling Relationships				
Anna R. Solmeyer, Sarah E. Killoren, Susan M. McHale, and Kimberly A. Updegraff [14] (2011)	Co-parenting Around Siblings' Differential Treatment in Mexican-Origin Families	Descriptive study	Sibling conflict and negativism occur due to differential treatment by parents.	
Susan M. McHale, Kimberly A. Updegraff, and Shawn D. Whiteman [1] (2012)	Sibling Relationships and Influences in Childhood and Adolescence	Systematic Review	Influence of siblings in family dyad	
Mark E Feinberg, Anna R Solmeyer, Susan M McHale [13] (2012)	The third rail of family systems: sibling relationships, mental and behavioral health, and preventive intervention in childhood and adolescence	Systematic Review	Warmth between siblings can help buffer against the negative effects of parental hostility	
Carli A. Obeldobel, Laura E. Brumariu, and Kathryn A. [10] (2023)	Parent-Child Attachment and Dynamic Emotion Regulation: A Systematic Review	Systematic Review	During family crises, sibling bonds take on great importance, with siblings possibly functioning as attachment figures for one another	An important role played by siblings during family crisis

Table 2. Characteristics of sibling that shape relationship between siblings

AUTHOR OF RESEARCH ARTICLE YEAR OF PUBLICATION	TITLE OF THE STUDY	METHODOLOGY	FINDINGS	COMMENTS
Role of Child Characteristics in Sibling Relationships				
Ji-Yeon Kim, Susan M McHale, D Wayne Osgood, Ann C Crouter [17] (2006)	Longitudinal course and family correlates of sibling relationships from childhood through adolescence	Descriptive study	Sibling relationships are defined by a range of structural features, such as gender differences	Girl-girl dyad had more intimate relationships.
Robert Plomin, Denise Daniels [22] (2011)	Why are children in the same family so different from one another?	Review Article	The order in which they are born exposes them to different biological and behavioral environments	
Sunaina Dhingraa and Prabhu L. Pingalia [18] (2021)	Effects of short birth spacing on birth-order differences in child stunting: Evidence from India.	Systematic Review	Age gap between siblings influenced the sibling effect on children's developmental outcomes	
Saishuang Wu, Donglan Zhang, Xinyue Li, Jin Zhao, Xiaoning Sun, Lu Shi, Yuping Mao, Yunting Zhang, and Fan Jiang [23] (2022)	Siblings and Early Childhood Development: Evidence from a Population-Based Cohort in Preschoolers from Shanghai	Cohort study	Elder siblings are more likely to present with better ECD (Early Child Development)	

Table 3. Role of Sibling in Development and Adjustment of Children

AUTHOR OF RESEARCH ARTICLE YEAR OF PUBLICATION	TITLE OF THE STUDY	METHODOLOGY	FINDINGS	COMMENTS
Sibling Influences on Development and Adjustment				
Dunn J [27] (2007)	Sibling relationships in early childhood	Quasi-experimental study	Through conflicts, siblings can develop skills in perspective taking, emotion understanding, negotiation, persuasion, and problem solving.	

AUTHOR OF RESEARCH ARTICLE YEAR OF PUBLICATION	TITLE OF THE STUDY	METHODOLOGY	FINDINGS	COMMENTS
Krista Gass, Jennifer Jenkins, Judy Dunn [26] (2015)	Are sibling relationships protective? A longitudinal study	Two-wave longitudinal design	Sibling positivity buffered the effects of stressful life events on internalizing symptoms.	
So Hyun Park and Eileen Cormier [31] (2018)	Influence of Siblings on Child Health Behaviors and Obesity: A Systematic Review	Systematic review	Findings indicated that children without siblings are more likely to be overweight or obese.	
Kathryn Kerns and Laura E Brumariu [28] (2020)	Is Insecure Parent-Child Attachment a Risk Factor for the Development of Anxiety in Childhood or Adolescence?	Meta-synthesis and systematic review	During family crises, sibling bonds take on great importance, with siblings possibly functioning as attachment figures for one another	

7. Conclusion

Our review reveals that early researches on siblings have borne fruit in the form of a relatively small literature on siblings' place in family structure, their role in family dynamics, and their influences on child and adolescent adjustment and overall development. The current literature review was designed to map, characterize, and analyse the existing knowledge on siblings and the factors influencing their relationships with each other. Besides this, the past few decades have seen advances in the methodological sophistication of sibling research, focussing on both members of the family dyad that is parents and the children, some efforts to directly or indirectly measure the adjustment, internalizing and externalizing problems associated with siblings. From this review we can deduce several conclusions about parent-child relationships, role of child characteristics in sibling relationships in consideration with the larger concept of siblings being embedded in the family subsystems. Yet this proposes a new road for carrying future researches and experiments that are discussed further.

Implications of the study

Altogether, this review lets us know how siblings are ubiquitous in each other's life. Researches reveal how sibling relationships are influenced by family dynamics and vice-versa. Even though they are very important in each other's life, yet their role and characteristics changes in the course of time depending upon many factors. The warmth shared by them can even over power the hostility felt by them due to parental differential treatment. [1]

In addition to the theoretical primacy of parent – child and marital bonds there may be other deterrents that decide the sibling's relationships, such as age, gender, birth order, environment in which they are brought up, etc. These deterrents should be taken into consideration while studying family subsystems as this provides us the window into how families operate as social and socializing systems. Despite its conceptual appeal, empirical research on families as systems is rare and difficult to be conducted. This may be in part because systems processes are difficult to measure.

Direction for Future Research

Although several of the best studies on siblings include longitudinal data, the use of experimental designs would provide information on causal processes regarding sibling effects, influences on family dyad as well as to improve their bond with each other.

Although this article focused on the family influence on sibling relationship, role and how they help each other adjust with new social processes, a better understanding of what are the negative effects of having siblings is needed as well.

There is also room for progress in understanding the various domains of behavioral problems and making a comparison between the siblings according to the birth order. In this review it is clear how parent differential treatment can lead to animosity and negativism between the siblings, experimental and interventional studies can be conducted to educate the parents and family members in order to reduce such kind of behaviours.

Comparative studies can be done to study the sibling bond and influence on each other between siblings brought up in single parent families and children brought up in families with both parents.

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Conflict of Interest

The author shares no conflict of interest with any significant.

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