

Children's understanding of their sibling relationships

Children's relationships with their brothers and sisters are an important part of their everyday lives. Most research on siblings examines predetermined topics, rather than starting from children's own perspectives. This study involving 58 children aged seven to 13 listened to their accounts of everyday life with their brothers and sisters, showing them to be insightful commentators. The researchers, Rosalind Edwards, Lucy Hadfield and Melanie Mauthner, found that:

- Children often said that having brothers and sisters meant there was always 'someone there' for them, and gave an emotional sense of protection from being alone. Children loved and cared for each other, but also recognised that everyday disputes occurred. Some children, however, intensely disliked their siblings.
- Some children said that their brothers and sisters gave them a strong sense of identity as being part of a group, and saw sharing possessions and bedrooms as unremarkable. Others regarded themselves as individuals who were also siblings. They had a strong sense of independence and found it difficult to share possessions or bedrooms with their siblings.
- Talking together was important to girls in their relationships with their sisters, while for boys doing things together mattered in their relationships with their brothers. In brother-sister relationships, activities took precedence over talking.
- Children often talked about older brothers and sisters taking care of and protecting younger siblings, as well as having power over them, and about younger siblings as receivers of this attention and authority. Some younger siblings, however, looked after their older brothers or sisters, or saw them as immature.
- Children had a sense of change over time in themselves and their siblings as they grew older. They continually faced change in their everyday relationships with their brothers and sisters, not just in problematic family circumstances.
- The researchers conclude that sibling relationships are complex and diverse, and that children are active in shaping these relationships. This has implications for a range of fields of professional practice, such as parenting skills, family therapy and bullying initiatives.



Background

Statistics on the number of children living with brothers and sisters are collected from a household point of view. Just over half of children in the UK live in households containing more than one child, and just under a quarter contain three or more children. However, parental separation and new partnerships can mean that children do not necessarily live in the same household as their biological siblings, and may have half or step-siblings living in the same or another household. Children may also have brothers and sisters who are no longer dependent and live elsewhere.

The number of siblings, their position in the age hierarchy, the age gap between them, and the gender balance of sibling groups are a focus of much research, which is overwhelmingly concerned with the resulting effects on child development, behaviour and educational outcomes. Children's own interpretations of their sibling relationships, and the social context in which they take place, are ignored.

This research explored how children understand and experience their everyday relationships with their brothers and sisters, and treated them as competent and expert informants on their own lives. The researchers interviewed 58 children aged between seven and 13, and drew out key themes from their accounts rather than searching for issues identified in advance. The research showed that sibling relationships are both complex and diverse, and that children are active in constructing them.

'There's always someone there'

Children often talked about their siblings in ways that showed they were an integral part of their emotional sense of security. Having brothers and sisters meant that there was always 'someone there' for them. Children spoke about how they felt loved and cared for by their brothers and sisters, and in turn loved and cared for their siblings. Having brothers and sisters gave these children emotional protection from an inner sense of being alone:

"I'm never really alone. But one of my friends, she doesn't have a brother or a sister, so she misses out ... Because [my sister] lives with me and she shares – cos' she knows more about me so I'm kind of closer to her than I would be to [friends]." (Izzy, age nine, talking about her younger sister)

"Brothers and sisters, they are part of your family. You love them and they love you." (Tom, age nine, talking about his older sisters and brother)

"The best thing about having sisters are they're there to help, they're around when you need them. They're there to have a good time with." (Ellie, age twelve, talking about her older sisters)

Children also recognised that alongside this sense of their siblings being there for them, everyday disputes occurred:

"[My brother and sister] are closer to me [than friends] because they're like family, so I know them better than I know my friends ... [We] quite often look after each other, but quite often [we] start fights ... We don't always like the same thing and the slightest argument always starts a fight." (Jason, age eleven, talking about his older sister and younger brother)

Some children, however, did not like their brothers and sisters:

"I don't really like them ... I spend most of my time by myself. And then they come up [to the bedroom] and destroy the thing that I've been playing with ... They are going to come to my school and I don't want them to." (Jacob, age eight, talking about his younger sister and brothers)

Feeling part of a group, and being independent

Children had a varying sense of the importance of being part of a sibling group, or being independent from their brothers and sisters. Some children had a strong sense of themselves as being part of a sibling group, and saw sharing possessions and bedrooms as unremarkable:

"They give me money. Like whenever I need it they give it to me really ... I let them go on my Playstation ... I just get all my stuff on one side [of the bedroom I share with one of my brothers] and put all his stuff on that side. He can use my stuff and I use his." (Lee, age ten, talking about his older brothers)

Their brothers and sisters provided these children with a sense of collective identity. If they were parted from their siblings, they often sought to integrate themselves into another group:

"It doesn't matter [if sisters don't live together], just as long as you have some girls to help you out when you need them." (Ellie, age twelve, talking about her non-resident older sisters)

“Now [my sister] has got a job she doesn’t come back [home] as often, but I am getting used to it ... [If someone else was in the same position, I’d tell him] if he has got any other relatives, spend more time with them.” (Jason, age eleven, talking about his oldest sister)

Other children had a strong sense of independence, and felt that their brothers and sisters threatened it. They did not want to share possessions or bedrooms with their siblings:

“[My brother and sister] share a room, and my mum and dad share a room, and I have a room to myself. I love it ... I put a note on the outside of my bedroom door saying no one allowed in my room.” (Harry, age nine, talking about his younger brother and sister)

“She goes through all my magazines when I tell her not to. I don’t like it but she still goes through them ... She takes my clothes, like she goes out in my coats when I tell her not to. She tries to wear my shoes out, she tries to wear my make-up.” (Mariko, age nine, talking about her younger sister)

These children saw themselves as individuals who were also siblings. They did not often refer to compensating for being parted from their brothers and sisters by integrating themselves into another group.

Talk and activity

Talk and activity were key elements in children’s relationships with their brothers and sisters. Their practice largely differed by gender. Girls often said that talking together was a significant aspect of feeling close to their sisters. For boys, sharing activities was an important part of their relationship with their brothers. Brother-sister relationships worked on male terms, with activities taking precedence over talk:

“I spend a lot of time with my sister when I go and see her. [We] just talk about life ... Cos’ my sister has moved, like I keep in contact with her and like that makes me feel better cos’ I still know what she looks like and what her voice sounds like and things like that.” (Anne, age eleven, talking about her older sister)

“I play gun games with [my younger sister] and we play games ... It’s a bit boring. Like there is no-one to play with who is boys, play football and stuff. I asked [my older sister], she did used to. Like she kicked it and then she just said, ‘oh it’s boring’ and just went in

... [My brother] used to, though, play football. Now he stays in and watches [television].” (Daniel, age nine, talking about his younger sister and older sister and brother)

For girls, an inability to talk to and confide in their sisters, and for boys a lack of shared activities often represented a sense of partial or complete emotional separation in the relationship. When older siblings left home and moved away, girls seemed more resourceful in maintaining closeness across geographical distance through talk-based communication (phone, email, texting, letters). Boys’ reliance on joint activities, however, meant that they had fewer resources to draw on to bridge the distance.

Age status

Many children talked about older brothers and sisters taking care of and protecting their younger siblings, as well as having power over them, and about younger siblings as receivers of this attention and (sometimes unappreciated) authority:

“My older brother and sister stick up for me around the house and in the street ... My little brother goes to the same school as me and we have to go there on the bus, so I help him on the bus.” (Emily, age eleven, talking about her older brother and sister, and younger brother)

“The best things are, they are fun to play with, they help you with your homework. Well, [my brother] helps with the computer if something goes wrong ... He like is older so he thinks he knows more. Well, he does, but you know [sighs]. When I don’t know things he makes it like I don’t know that much.” (Chris, age eleven, talking about his older brother)

Younger brothers and sisters, however, sometimes also looked after or protected their older siblings, for example when they were ill or being bullied. Some children described their older brothers or sisters as acting in immature ways for their age, and saw themselves as more mature:

“He is just immature. Because he doesn’t act like older ... Cos’ I’m probably more grown up than he is. I wish he’d go out more an’ act more like a teenager.” (Cora, age 13, talking about her older brother)

Change in relationships

As they grew older, children had a sense of change in their relationships with their brothers and sisters over time. This related to abilities and interests:

“[My sister] does different things to me, but I do the same things as [my brother] ... I used to play with her more when I was tiny ... We got older and changed.” (Jason, age eleven, talking about his older sister and younger brother)

“When I couldn’t get to sleep or something, she used to let me come and sleep in her bed and stuff, and used to, like, hug. And now it’s like her in one bedroom and me in the other, because we don’t really want to sleep together now. She thinks I’m a bit babyish now, because I’m not like out at all the places like she’s going.” (Natalie, age twelve, talking about her older sister)

In this way, children were living with emotional and social change as part of their everyday lives with their brothers and sisters. For children, change was not just associated with problematic family circumstances.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that the complexity and diversity of children’s understanding of their relationships with their siblings, as well as shifts in these relationships over time, mean that there are no universal prescriptions. Nonetheless, the study’s findings have implications for several fields of professional practice. For example:

- children’s feelings that having siblings means that ‘there is always someone there’ for them need to be acknowledged in curricula for practice;

- being part of a sibling group and being independent could inform parenting information and skills courses and family therapy interventions, and provide a benchmark for decisions about looked-after children;
- talk and activity as gender-related elements in children’s sibling relationships are relevant to educators, play leaders, social workers, health visitors, family therapists and others concerned with children’s methods of communication;
- the potential benefit of both older and younger siblings as a resource could be recognised in initiatives to deal with bullying in school and outside the home.

About the project

Researchers based at London South Bank University and The Open University carried out flexible, child-focused interviews with 58 children aged between seven and 13 (for details, see www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/jrfsibresources). The participating children were evenly divided between girls and boys. Half came from working-class families, and half were middle class. The majority of children were white. Half lived with both their biological parents, a quarter lived in step-families, and the rest lived in lone-mother families or an extended family. Half the children had one or two siblings, and the other half had three or more. About half had siblings living outside their family household.

For further information

The full report, **Children’s understanding of their sibling relationships** by Rosalind Edwards, Lucy Hadfield and Melanie Mauthner, is published for the Foundation by the National Children’s Bureau (ISBN 1 904787 48 7, price £12.95).

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