

Family relationships in middle childhood

There is increasing government interest in promoting positive parent-child relationships as one means of improving outcomes for children. More generally, debates continue about the role of fathers, parenting in single-parent families, and what helps or hinders good parent-child relationships. A team from the University of Sussex sought to address some of these issues by examining the parent-child relationships for 346 children in 173 families with at least two children between the ages of 4 – 8 years. The families were diverse in terms of socio-economic background, and included two-parent as well as single-mother families. The research project found:

- While mothers and fathers described similar relationships with their children, differences apparent to observers were not 'seen' by the family. Rather, family members saw 'through' differences in behaviour to similar feelings underlying it.
- The 'climate' of the home, such as whether the home felt organised and whether parents got on together, helped explain how well siblings got on together and how fathers got on with their children better than 'structural' variables such as children's age, gender or intelligence.
- Family climate was less important to mothers. Rather, factors such as the mother's mental health, temperament, and education were important to how they got on with their children.
- Issues such as crowding and social class were not related to the quality of relationships in the home.
- The sibling relationship played an important part in explaining differences in children's adjustment, even when controlling for the impact of the parenting they experienced.
- Within families, differences in siblings' adjustment were due, in part, to different treatment by their parents and, in part, to temperamental differences between the siblings.
- Although lone-mother households experienced different circumstances and backgrounds, they were no different from two-parent homes in the quality of relationships between mothers and their children.



Background

This study paints a portrait of 'ordinary' family relationships among a sample of parents and children aged 4-8 drawn from the local community. The study is underpinned by a view of the family as a 'system' and this has shaped both the measures used and the analysis of the data. Viewing the family as a system means the researchers have recorded the perspective of each family member using the accounts to explore how family members get on together, the factors both within and outside the home that affect family life, the role of family relationships in children's well-being, and differences between lone-mother and two-parent households. This has been done in the context of 'ordinary' families, i.e. those not facing particular difficulties, to create a backdrop for studies of 'non-normative' family life.

Reliable accounts?

Children as young as four and five told a coherent and meaningful story of their relationships with other members of their family. Their reports concurred with parents' accounts to the same extent as has been found in studies with adolescents. This level of consistency is impressive, both in view of how young the children were, and of the fact that they answered different types of questions from their parents about the relationship, so limiting the extent to which accounts could agree.

Where there were discrepancies between children's and parents' accounts, these were a helpful reminder that each family member holds a unique perspective on life at home. For example, children's accounts provided insight into the significance of the marital relationship for relationships between fathers and children in ways that were less apparent from parents' reports.

Differences between mothers and fathers

Reports from each member of the family meant the researchers could examine different perspectives on the quality of relationships between each child and each parent in the study.

In the sample as a whole, family members described mothers and fathers as enjoying similar relationships with their children. This differed from the findings from videotaped observations: these revealed some differences between mothers and fathers in how they related to their children. It appears that parents and children see 'through' differences in behaviour to similar feelings or levels of affection underlying it.

Looking within families, both parents enjoyed comparable relationships with their children, in part, because parents shared similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds. Similarly, the study found few differences between parents' relationships with the older and younger child. This echoes previous research that has found birth order has little impact on the quality of parents' relationships with each child in the family.

Factors linked to the quality of parent-child relationships

For both mothers and fathers, better educated parents tended to use more constructive and fewer harsh discipline strategies with their children. Other 'structural' factors did not help to explain differences in the quality of family relationships. For example, there were no real links between children's age, verbal ability or gender and how they got on with their parents. Rather, aspects of the family climate and the temperament of the individuals within the family were more telling of family relationships.

Children's temperament affected the tenor of family relationships. More emotionally volatile children experienced poorer relationships with their parents, as did more active older children.

Maternal temperament was also significant. Mothers who tended to get angry and upset experienced poorer relationships with their children, although this was not the case for fathers. Indeed, overall, mothers who enjoyed more 'even' temperaments, better education and better mental health fostered more organised households and more rewarding relationships with their children.

In contrast, fathers' relationships were more dependent on the family climate. Fathers got on better with their children when they were part of a smoothly run household, when they got involved in activities with the whole family, and when they were happy in their relationship with the mother.

Previous research suggests that mothers can play a 'gate-keeping' role and may exercise some influence on how fathers get on with their children (Grossman et al., 1988). These results shed additional light on this issue. The researchers suggest that mothers influence the family climate, and this climate, as well as the quality of the marital relationship, can foster good quality relationships between fathers and their children, and among the children themselves. However, as this sample largely reflected a traditional division of household labour, it is difficult to generalise these findings to all families.

Sibling relationships

Across families, siblings varied considerably in how well they got on with one another. Even within families, the relationships were often very ambivalent, rapidly switching between warmth and conflict during the observed interactions.

The personal characteristics important to the parent-child relationship were also linked to how well siblings got on with one another. More emotionally volatile children had poorer relationships with their siblings. This was also the case for children who exhibited problem behaviour and poor social competence.

Siblings' relationships were also affected by the family climate. Siblings enjoyed better relationships when they lived in well-organised homes and had parents who were happy in their marital relationship and satisfied with the level of support available to them. Neither involvement in family activities, social class nor crowding were linked to how well siblings got on.

While there was a weak link between age-gap and the sibling relationship, this effect disappeared once the age of the older siblings was taken into account. Once the older children reached 7 or 8, regardless of the age gap, the sibling relationship deteriorated.

Similarly tenuous links were apparent between how siblings got on and their respective genders. Out of all the family members' reports, only siblings' accounts indicated that sister 'pairs' enjoyed the most rewarding relationships and older brothers with younger sisters had the poorest relationships.

Relationships and well-being

While the research found strong links between children's adjustment and the parenting they experienced it was also the case that the sibling relationship had an impact on children's adjustment above and beyond the impact of parenting. Relationships between brothers and sisters are clearly important for children's well-being. When looking at those 10 per cent of sibling pairs characterised by the most extreme conflict and hostility, older siblings scored above the clinical cut-off in terms of their problematic behaviour. Intense conflict between siblings may not be 'normal and harmless' but, instead, may point to underlying emotional and behavioural problems.

Children in the same family varied considerably in how well adjusted they were, and particularly in levels of socially competent behaviour. Differences in siblings' adjustment were partly explained by differences in how parents treated each sibling. Previous research suggests that siblings may fare poorly as a result of differences in how parents treat them where children believe the treatment is unfair or unjustified.

Structure or substance?

Contrary to public concern about the impact of growing up in lone-mother households, few differences between the quality of relationships in lone-mother and two-parent families were apparent. Although lone-mother households in the sample had poorer socio-economic circumstances, they were no different from two-parent homes in the quality of relationships between mothers and their children and how these relationships were affected by their setting.

Conclusion

Based on these observations, the researchers conclude that:

- Children can provide meaningful and sensitive accounts of life at home and have a role to play in decisions that affect their family life. Innovative ways of recording children's perspectives, such as via the Berkeley Puppet Interviews, provide useful tools for obtaining children's input.
- Children benefit from being treated fairly by parents, or being reassured that different treatment is motivated by parents' desire to be fair.
- Links between children's social competence and the sibling relationship suggest that brothers and sisters have the potential to 'teach' each other socially appropriate behaviour.
- The family is an inter-dependent system of family relationships, climate and characteristics. As such, it paints a picture of risk and resilience whereby families can become caught in vicious cycles of conflict and disadvantage or virtuous cycles of personal and relational well-being. This picture echoes that of a previous JRF report (Welsh et al.).

- Support needs to be sensitive to the family system. Helping parents to get on better may improve siblings' relationships and well-being. On the other hand, understanding a child's behavioural difficulties may involve taking a wider view and looking at relationships between siblings and between the parents and the child.
- Support also needs to be holistic. Supporting parents involves taking account of the emotional and personal resources available to parents, the setting in which they operate and how well they get on together.
- Preoccupations with family structure can prove an unhelpful distraction from identifying those families caught up in cycles of tension and disadvantage that make it difficult to establish rewarding and nurturing relationships between parents and their children.

About the project

The study involved 173 families with two children (one aged 4-6 and another, older sibling aged 8 or under) – 55 lone-mother families and 118 two-parent families. Most families were recruited through information leaflets distributed by schools to parents of reception and Year 1 children. A small proportion of families (3 per cent) were recruited via advertisements in local newspapers and lone-parent support groups.

Researchers made two visits to each two-parent family and one or two visits to each lone-mother family. The fathers of the lone-mother households were not contacted. Each visit was conducted with two testers. During these visits the children were given opportunities to play together in both structured and unstructured situations. Parents and children were interviewed separately and the parents were asked to complete a number of questionnaire measures. Children were interviewed using the innovative 'Berkeley Puppet Interview' involving two puppets presenting the children with forced-choice questions. In addition, each parent and each child were videoed completing a structured task together.

For more information

The full report, **Family relationships in middle childhood** by Alison Pike, Joanne Coldwell and Judy Dunn, is published for the Foundation by the National Children's Bureau as part of the Parenting in Practice series.

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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