Picture: Rhonda Milner

ADOLESCENT SIBLING CONFLICT

THE ROLE OF PARENTAL FAVOURITISM

GRANIA SHEEHAN examines the relationship between adolescents' experiences of parental favouritism and the way in which siblings communicate and deal with their conflict.

For most people, the sibling bond is the longest lasting relationship in their lives. Like marriage and parenthood, it is a relationship with the potential to provide intimacy, congenial involvement and social support throughout the life span. Not only do siblings influence the development of each other's social and cognitive skills, but their relationship can be described as primarily a positive and supportive one (Kaplan, Ade-Ridder and Hennon 1991).

Many siblings enjoy these benefits, but there are family circumstances where this is not the case.

Family Research Pathways to Policy CONFERENCE

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Parental Favouritism

One of the factors that has been identified as influential in determining the nature of a child's relationship with his or her siblings is the child's experiences of differential parenting practices within the family.

Differential parenting refers to differences in how parents behave towards one child relative to their behaviour with other children in the family.

Differential parenting that is perceived by children as legitimate, based on the different needs of the children, and responsive to the developmental differences between children, may not have the same emotional sequelae as parental behaviour that is perceived as unfair and consistently 'one-sided'. It is these latter parenting practices that can more readily be construed as parental favouritism. It is the child's experience of differential parenting practices as unfair and inequitable that moderates the adverse effects of differential parenting on the quality of the sibling relationship.

According to Hetherington (1988), parental favouritism breeds hostility between siblings. Disparities in parents' affection for, and warmth towards different children in the family, and differences in how restrictive and punitive parents are towards each child have been shown to undermine the quality of the sibling relationship and provoke hostile, coercive and frequent conflict between siblings (Boer, Goedhart and Treffers 1992; Brody, Stoneman, McCoy 1992; Hetherington 1988; McHale, Crouter and McGuire 1995).

A child's experience of parental favouritism appears to constitute a family dynamic which over time creates feelings of hostility and mistrust between siblings. The favoured sibling will be the one likely to experience guilt or contempt for the disfavoured brother or sister who, in turn, is likely to experience feelings of anger, resentment and jealously towards their favoured sibling.

Sibling Conflict

The Parental Favouritism Study was designed to explore further the relation between parental favouritism in the family and sibling conflict by focusing specifically on the influence that parental favouritism has on the way adolescent siblings experience and resolve conflict with one another.

The way in which conflict is dealt with between siblings was chosen as the outcome of interest in this study for two reasons.

First, how siblings resolve conflict in their relationship plays an important role in adolescent social development. Conflict between siblings seems to be an inevitable and frequent part of family life as children share space and resources. According to Furman and Buhrmester (1985), conflict is a defining feature of the sibling relationship and is common during early childhood and adolescence.

The nature of sibling conflict becomes more sophisticated during middle childhood and throughout adolescence, with the ways in which siblings deal with conflict in their relationship becoming increasingly verbal, and the use of violence to resolve conflict decreasing (Cicirelli 1995). These developmental changes in children's social understanding enables adolescents to deal more effectively with conflict with their siblings and others. The frequent nature of sibling conflict provides adolescents with continual opportunities to develop and exercise their social skills, and to learn to compromise, negotiate and resolve disputes.

The second reason why adolescent siblings conflict resolution style is of interest is because it serves as an important indicator of the quality of the sibling relationship.

Conflict has frequently been conceptualised as inherently problematic, with no allowance made for effective resolution and beneficial outcomes where both parties gain by having engaged in the conflict. Markman, Stanley and Blumberg (1994) argue that conflict between people can be constructive and that it is the way in which people work to resolve conflict which determines whether or not conflict is translated into a negative relationship experience. It is constructive for siblings to

engage in conflict resolution in which differences are discussed openly, and the siblings support one another in jointly solving problems and seek mutually acceptable solutions to their disagreements.

This form of conflict indicates a very different quality of relationship from hostile, emotionally destructive or physically coercive forms of dispute. It is through *constructive* sibling conflict that adolescents develop both their social skills and their relationship with their sibling.

Parental Favouritism Study

As mentioned earlier, the Parental Favouritism Study was designed to examine the link between parental favouritism and the way in which adolescent siblings work to resolve conflict between one another and, more specifically, to assess whether adolescents from families characterised by high levels of parental favouritism were using maladaptive approaches to resolve such conflict.

Families who participated in the study were those with identical and non-identical twins, identified through the National Health and Medical Research Council Twin Registry. The sample comprised 175 adolescent twin sibling pairs and their parents. All families were involved in the questionnaire study, and a sub-sample of 62 families took part in an observational study.

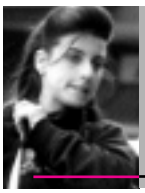
Only families with twins were asked to participate because this strategy allows the examination of issues relating to parental favouritism while holding constant sibling differences in age and birth order – which can be problematic in studies of differential parental treatment (Dunn and Plomin 1990). The sample was not randomly selected, and included twin families who volunteered to participate from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The siblings ranged in age from 12 to 17 years (with an average age of 14 years) and the majority of the families were in the middle to high socioeconomic bracket. The total sample comprised 75 identical twins and 100 non-identical twins. In this sample, 56 of the twin pairs were same sex male dyads, 75 were same sex female dyads, and 44 were mixed sex twin dyads.

All families provided information about the incidence of parental favouritism. The twins' and parents' reports of parental favouritism were measured using a standardised questionnaire-based measure of differential parenting. Four aspects of parental favouritism were assessed – differential maternal affectionate and disciplinary behaviour, and differential paternal affectionate and disciplinary behaviour. These dimensions of parenting behaviour (parental affection and parental control), were chosen because they tap theoretically significant features of the adolescent's relationship with family members, and there is strong empirical support for these as primary aspects of functioning for the parent-child relationship (Maccoby and Martin 1983; Hetherington 1988).

Twins also reported on the ways in which they worked towards resolving conflict with their brother or sister. Their reports of communication with their twin during conflict were measured using a standardised questionnaire-based measure of conflict resolution style.

The characteristics of the siblings conflict resolution style that were measured included destructive characteristics such as coercion and attacking, avoidance, and post-conflict distress. These ways of dealing with conflict in a relationship are characterised by low levels of concern for maintaining the relationship, with both parties more concerned for themselves (Schaap, Buunk and Kerkstra 1988). The level of distress experienced after conflict is an index of the extent to which the conflict interaction had brought the parties closer together, or left them hurt and resentful (Noller and White 1990).

A measure of constructive conflict resolution style which assessed compromise and problem solving during sibling conflict was also included. Working to resolve conflict in this way maintains and fosters the sibling relationship.



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Observation-based measures of the twins communication with one another were also taken for a sub-sample of the twins. This sub-sample of 62 twin pairs were filmed engaging in a discussion with one another; how they interacted was recorded by observers trained in assessing communication in families. The behaviour of the twins was rated by the observers on a number of behavioural dimensions including the twin's involvement with one another, their friendly and rejecting behaviour towards one another, the level of anxiety demonstrated during the discussion, and the amount of control each exerted over their co-twin's behaviour. Data were analysed using regression modelling techniques, with sibling differences scores the primary unit of analysis.

This article presents only a summary of the findings. The full paper, detailing statistical procedures and method of analysis is available from the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Parental Favouritism and Destructive Conflict

In families where twins and parents report parental favouritism, both the favoured and disfavoured twin reported using destructive patterns of communication when engaging in conflict with one another. More specifically, reports of parental favouritism were related to twins' reports of more coercive, aggressive and avoidant behaviour towards their co-twin and less problem solving and compromise. In families where parental favouritism is present, the twins' reports of sibling conflict were also characterised by high levels of post-conflict distress.

It appears that in families where children experience parental favouritism, the twins' management of conflict is characterised by low levels of concern for maintaining the sibling relationship; the experience of conflict with their sibling leaves these siblings feeling hurt and resentful.

Conversely, in families characterised by parenting behaviour that was equally affectionate, with the same level and form of discipline and control experienced by each twin, twins reported engaging in a conflict resolution style that indicates that they were concerned both for their sibling and to maintain their relationship. This suggests that in a family environment of fair and equal treatment, siblings behave in ways that will foster their relationship with one another.

These findings support Hetheringon's (1988) proposition that disparities in parental affection and coercion can lead young children and adolescents to behave in aggressive, rivalrous or avoidant ways towards their siblings. In the present study, the twins' experience of parental favouritism adversely affected how both the favoured and disfavoured twin managed and worked towards resolving conflict in their relationship. Parental favouritism appears to create a rivalrous dynamic between siblings from which the quality of the sibling relationship as a whole is affected. The importance of differential parenting practices to the quality of the sibling relationship is consistent with Anna Freud's speculation (cited in Dunn 1993: 797) that a child's first ideas of fairness, justice and rights develop within the sibling relationship.

Everyday Sibling Interaction

Observations of twins' behaviour when engaging in a non-conflict discussion with one another tell a different story. In families characterised by differential parenting practices the disfavoured twin was likely to be the protagonist in discussion with their co-twin, and to be less friendly and more rejecting than the favoured co-twin was towards them. The disfavoured twin was also rated by observers as being the more controlling in the discussion, frequently instructing their twin on what to say and do, and dominating the conversation.

These findings suggest that each twin's unique experience of being favoured or disfavoured may create a systematic form of imbalance in the twin relationship, and

that parental favouritism may constitute a potential family risk factor which has a specifically disruptive effect on the disfavoured child. These systematic behavioural differences between twins in their everyday communication with one another may, in the long run, be responsible for conflicted and destructive sibling relationship dynamics.

Theoretical models of the cognitive context in which relationships develop (Grynch and Fincham 1990) suggest that these patterns of unfriendly and non-supportive behaviour in the daily, non-conflict interactions between siblings will inevitably create a negative relationship dynamic for both the children. Over time, this form of negativity and imbalance in the behaviour of siblings when interacting with one another may lead to the sibling relationship becoming a primarily destructive process in the child's family life.

In families where children *perceive* that they are not treated fairly, relative to their siblings, these perceptions about parental favouritism appear to affect both the immediate everyday behaviour of the siblings as well as the much broader and longer-term quality of the sibling relationship.

As Cicirelli (1995) points out, adolescence is a critical period in a child's life for the reorganisation and development of the sibling relationship. For most people it is the last time in their lives that they will share so much of their daily life, and be living in close proximity to their siblings. The development of negative patterns of behaviour between siblings during adolescence may have implications for the quality and continuity of sibling relationships throughout the life span. This becomes more important when it is taken into account that, for most people, the sibling relationship is the longest lasting relationship in their lives.

Further research is needed to increase our understanding of the impact of parental favouritism on the sibling relationship, and to explore patterns of continuity and change in the nature of these influences on the quality of the sibling relationship over time.

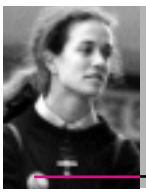
Implications for Families in Distress

Maintaining the quality of the sibling bond becomes an issue of critical importance when families come under stress. In times of family crisis the natural support system existing among siblings can serve to strengthen children against the adverse consequences of severe and frequent marital conflict and family dissolution. Although siblings cannot substitute for parents, they can provide for each other a safe and predictable world inside a family undergoing such instability and change (Eno 1985).

The need to ensure that the sibling relationship remains close throughout times of family stress may occur at the same time as severe patterns of differential parenting practice within the family. Marital conflict and the process of breakdown of the marriage can lead parents to enter into strong parent–child coalitions and alliances. A parent who confides in or is overly dependent on a child after divorce, or actively fosters different patterns of residence and contact for children in the family, may not only be hurrying the child into adulthood, but may also be contributing to a process of sibling comparison and rivalry that in the long run can deprive both children of an essential support system crucial in such times of family distress.

Whether through evaluation, intervention, observation, or direct counselling in times of family stress, practioners need to work towards improving the sibling bond, as well as helping to negotiate the stresses and strains in the spousal and parent–child relationships. Strengthening these ties can help children recover from divorce crisis more quickly and effectively (Nichols 1986).

Both traditional and current counselling practice justifiably focus on the problem areas between parents and their children. The current findings, however, suggest that practitioners need to consider the parent–child and sibling relationship dynamics in unison. Counsellors and legal practitioners need to understand and help foster the interdependencies that exist between the parent–child relationship, parenting practices and the sibling relationship.



In families where children experience parental favouritism, the adolescents' management of conflict is characterised by low levels of concern for maintaining their sibling relationship.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the importance of taking into account the differing experiences and perspectives of each child in the family. They should not, however, be interpreted as advocating a standardised form of parenting practice for all children in the family. Differential parental practices are often founded on very real developmental, skills-based, health, age and temperament differences between siblings, and effective and sensitive parenting must be responsive to these differences between the children.

The challenge is for parents to find a balance between responsive parenting that takes into account individual children's needs and differences, while at the same time maintaining fairness and equity in their parenting practices.

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Grania Sheehan is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

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