or 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-Riddler and Hennon 1991).

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

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 practices within the family.

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 jealousy towards their favoured sibling.

Sibling Conflict

The Parental Favouritism Study was designed to explore further the relationship 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 nature of sibling conflict becomes more sophisticated during middle childhood and 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 (Gicirelli 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 differ-
ences are discussed openly, and the sib-
lings support one another in jointly solving
problems and seek mutually acceptable
solutions to their disagreements.

This form of conflict indicates a very dif-
ferent quality of relationship from hostile,
emotionally destructive or physically coer-
cive forms of dispute. It is through con-
structive 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 exam-
ine the link between parental favouritism
and the way in which adolescent siblings
work to resolve conflict between one an-
other and, more specifically, to assess
whether adolescents from families char-
acterised 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-identi-
cal twins, identified through the National
Health and Medical Research Council Twin
Registry. The sample comprised 175 adol-
escent 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 observa-
tional study.

Only families with twins were asked to participate because this
strategy allows the examination of issues relating to parental favouritism while hold-
ing 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 youngest sibling was aged 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 stan-
dardised questionnaire-based measure of
differential parenting. Four aspects of
parental favouritism were assessed – dif-
ferential maternal affectionate and disci-
plinary behaviour, and differential paternal
affectionate and disciplinary behaviour.
These dimensions of parental behaviour
(parental affection and parental control), were
chosen because they tap theoretically
significant features of the adolescent’s rela-
tionship with family members, and there
is strong empirical support for these as pri-
mary aspects of functioning for the parent-
child relationship (Maccoby and Martin

Twins also reported on the ways in
which they worked towards resolving con-
flict 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 con-
flict resolution style that were measured
included destructive characteristics such as
coercion and attacking, avoidance, and
post-conflict distress. These ways of deal-
ing with conflict in a relationship are char-
acterised by low levels of concern for
maintaining the relationship, with both
parties more concerned for themselves
(Schaap, Baunk 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 res-
olution 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.

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 behav-
ioral style was rated by the observers on
a number of behavioural dimensions
including the twin’s involvement with one
another, their friendly and rejecting behav-
our towards one another, the level of anxi-
ety demonstrated during the discus-
sion, and the amount of control each
exercised over their co-twin’s behaviour.
Data were analysed using regression mod-
eling techniques, with sibling differences
scores the primary unit of analysis.

This article presents only a summary of the
findings. The full paper, detailing sta-
tistical 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 compro-
mise. 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 con-
lict with their sibling leaves these sib-
lings 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 Hetherington’s
(1988) proposition that disparities in
parental affection and coer-
cion can lead young chil-
dren and adolescents to
behave in aggressive, rival-
rous 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 man-
aged and worked towards resolving con-
lict 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 dif-
ferential 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 fami-
lies 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 relationships.

Theoretical models of the cognitive context in which relationships develop (Grych 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 hurting the child into adulthood, but may also be contributing to a process of sibling competition 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, practitioners 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 crises 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.

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.

**References**


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