



Are Brothers and Sisters a Good Source of Support?

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The beneficial effects of parental support on a child's well-being have been documented in research. However, little is known about the possible benefits of having a strong relationship with an older brother or sister. This longitudinal study investigated the effects of positive sibling relationships on the mental health of children who experience stressful life events.

Method

Data for this study came from the Avon Brothers and Sisters Study, which administered surveys to both the mothers and children of 192 families. Eligible families for this sub-sample met the following inclusion criteria: (1) they had participated in both the 1996 and 1998 data collection periods of the larger study, and; (2) their youngest child had an older sibling over the age of 7. One hundred and thirty-two families were included in the analysis. The mean age of the youngest child was 4.9 years, and the average age difference of the participating older sibling (the one closest in age to the child) was 5.6 years.

Measures used were administered to both the mothers and siblings. Mothers reported on the number and magnitude of stressful life events experienced by the family in the previous 12 months and also on mother-child relationship quality during this year. Mothers also completed the Child Behavior Checklist for the target child in order to measure internalizing and externalizing symptoms. This measure was also completed two years later in order to examine causal effects. Sibling relationship quality and affection levels were assessed by the older brother or sister.

Results

Hierarchical regressions were used to control for child internalizing and externalizing scores from 1996, family socio-economic status, and target child and sibling age and sex. Results showed that the statistical interaction between sibling affection and stressful life events predicted a child's internalizing scores; the overall effect was an added 6% variance. Follow-up analysis revealed that children who experience stressful life events and have an affectionate relationship with their older sibling have significantly lower internalizing scores than those children who do not have an affectionate relationship with an older brother or sister. For children who experience life events that are not as stressful, the quality of the sibling relationships did not predict internalizing scores. Externalizing scores were not influenced by sibling relationships.

Next, the authors examined whether sibling affection influenced internalizing symptoms after controlling for mother-child relationship quality. A positive maternal relationship was not directly related to internalizing symptoms in children. However, the interaction between stressful life events and sibling affection remained significant after controlling for mother-

child relationship ($R^2 = .073$, $p < .01$). Overall analyses revealed that the mother-child relationship did not predict child internalizing symptoms in the face of stressful life events.

Finally, it was noted that neither the age difference nor the gender composition of the sibling dyads influenced the significance of the findings. In other words, sibling affection is protective regardless of the size of the age gap between siblings or the gender composition of the sibling pair.

Discussion & Conclusions

The major finding of this study is that children who experience stressful life events are less likely to experience an increase in internalizing symptoms if they have an affectionate relationship with an older sibling. This protective effect was not dependent on the quality of the relationship between the mother and child, so it is possible that older siblings may be an important source of the support and comfort usually assumed to be the responsibility of a parent.

A major strength of this study is its longitudinal design which allowed researchers to determine that an existing positive relationship with an older sibling predicted lower internalizing symptoms after the occurrence of stressful life events. A limitation of this study is that the level of perceived stress was reported by the mother, not the target child (most likely due to the fact that the average age of the children in the sample was less than five years). More research needs to be conducted to support this finding as well as to explore how sibling relationships can alleviate internalizing symptoms during stressful times.

Given that sibling affection was found to be a protective factor regardless of the quality of the mother-child relationship, this study suggests that more attention should be given to the role of an older sibling as a source of support and comfort for a young child experiencing stress. Future therapeutic interventions for children with emotional difficulties could focus on strengthening the relationship not only between child and parent, but also between the child and his or her brothers or sisters.



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