Children’s earliest interactions are those that occur in their families; given that most children in Western societies have at least one sibling, relations with brothers and sisters constitute an important part of the family system.

Sibling interactions have a number of unique features that differentiate them from children’s other early relationships such as with parents and peers. First, inherent developmental and power differences between older and younger siblings in the same family lead children to take on different roles in sibling interactions. For instance, older siblings more frequently act as caretakers and teachers for their younger siblings than vice versa. At the same time, because they are often relatively close in age, siblings engage in reciprocal and returned exchanges that are typical of peers, such as play. In this sense, sibling relationships are defined by both complementary (i.e., hierarchical) and reciprocal (i.e., equal, returned) features. Second, siblings spend a great deal of time interacting with one another. In fact, during early childhood, many children spend more time with their siblings than with anyone else, including their parents. As a result, they develop a long history of shared exchanges, thus establishing a common history together and potentially constructing an intimate bond. Siblings can, and often do, use this knowledge of one another’s preferences, habits, and characteristics in both positive (e.g., to comfort) and negative (e.g., to tease) ways. Third, perhaps partly because of the amount of time they spend together, sibling relationships tend to be affectively intense, often characterized by strong positive, negative, and sometimes ambivalent emotions. Last, there are wide individual differences in the qualities of sibling interactions; these relationships vary dramatically in terms of both warmth and hostility, and some pairs can exhibit a blend of both characteristics.

These distinct features of sibling relationships are evident in the features of positive and negative interactions that are typically observed between young siblings. On the more positive side, friendly sibling relations in early childhood are associated with positive and adaptive functioning as children get older. Play is one important context in which siblings often engage in sustained and sophisticated forms of positive interaction, including pretense. Social pretense is associated with children’s friendly interactions, their understanding of their social worlds, and their performance on formal measures of social cognitive ability such as their understandings of others’ psychological perspectives. During pretense, siblings learn to negotiate in play to create joint understandings of play scenarios, transform objects, scaffold and extend one another’s ideas, and use language that reflects the story characters’ feelings and thoughts. Older siblings can be adept at scaffolding play interactions for younger siblings and to engage them in collaborative ways. In addition, siblings frequently engage in warm and prosocial behavior, with older siblings more likely to initiate friendly, helpful interactions, and engage in caretaking and comforting. In turn, younger siblings are more likely to imitate and respond positively to their older sibling. Nevertheless, as younger siblings get older they become more active partners and are seen to take the lead more often during play and friendly interactions.

Siblings also spontaneously teach one another new skills and concepts about their physical and social worlds and use a range of sophisticated strategies such as verbal instruction, demonstration, and scaffolding to convey knowledge and involve the learner. Older siblings engage in more teaching about a range of topics such as math and literacy than younger siblings during ongoing interactions at home, but younger siblings also teach their older siblings at times.

On the negative side, many interactions between siblings are defined by high levels of conflict
and rivalry. Observational research indicates that preschool-age children engage in conflict between three and 10 times per hour, most frequently about property-related issues (e.g., competition for shared resources in the home). Although these disputes provide opportunities for children to learn about moral issues such as property rights and ownership, conflicts between siblings are typically poorly resolved, and can also become emotionally intense or aggressive. Older siblings are especially likely to use power-assertive strategies (e.g., aggression) to get what they want at the expense of younger siblings; this is especially true when younger siblings do not defend themselves. When sibling conflicts become extremely aggressive or violent, this has been associated with problematic consequences for children's well-being and relationships outside of the family. For this reason, many parents are concerned about sibling conflict and the best ways to intervene. Research suggests that parents play an important role in supporting siblings' ability to develop empathy and to resolve issues constructively. For example, when parents are trained to mediate sibling conflicts (i.e., help children understand each other's perspectives and come to mutually agreeable solutions), children are more effective at resolving issues on their own. Younger siblings become empowered to play an active role in negotiations, and in turn, older siblings are more likely to consider the goals and emotions of their younger counterparts.

Broadly speaking, when parents interact with siblings, it is important for them to avoid engaging in differential treatment and indiscriminately favoring one child over the other. Rivalry for parents' love and attention is evident from the first days of sibling relationships. The birth of a new sibling is often a challenging and stressful time for older siblings, who may exhibit a range of positive (e.g., affection, interest) and negative (e.g., clinginess, distress) reactions to this event. As children get older, rivalry also appears in other forms. For example, children frequently tattle on their siblings and react in jealous ways when parents give more attention to their brother or sister. When children view their parents as engaging in consistent favoritism, this has been linked to poor-quality sibling relationships, particularly if children view the favoritism as unfair.

In conclusion, the sibling relationship is a multifaceted and rich context for children's development, providing a natural laboratory for children to learn how to get along with significant others in their social worlds.

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See also Aggression; Family Systems Theories; Prosocial Behavior; Siblings and Play

Further Readings


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