

# Sibling relationships and its influence on social and emotional development in childhood and adolescence

## Introduction

Sibling relationships are a unique bond, with majority of children around the world growing up with at least one sibling. Through everyday interactions during play and family activities, siblings continuously learn from one another, providing opportunities for the enhancement of social, emotional, and behavioural skills and development. Although there has been increased recognition amongst family and developmental scholars of the importance of sibling relationships, the research lags significantly in comparison to the wealth of research on parents and peer relationships, and its impact on children's development.

## Aim

This review aimed to understand the latest literature regarding sibling relationships and their influence on social and emotional development in childhood and adolescence.

## Methodology

A scoping review was conducted of published articles from PubMed, PsycINFO, ProQuest and ERIC between 2009-2024. Following the screening and quality assessment process, a total of seven articles were analysed and results presented as part of a narrative discussion.

## Results

Findings noted; limited global coverage and therefore the generalisability of the data to other populations, overrepresentation of mothers as the sole parent participant and the impact of differential treatment. The findings also revealed several key themes including; emphasising the importance of understanding sibling dynamics within the broader contexts of cultural and family processes, that siblings can act as both positive and negative role models; the regulating effects of relational warmth; to remember the vulnerability of other siblings who may also be in need of support; and finally, when nurtured, sibling relationships can foster lifelong connections and act as a protective factor.

## Discussion

Current literature indicates that siblings can have influential roles within the lives of children and families. From a family systems perspective, siblings are part of interconnected system where changes in one member can affect others. Bowen's Family Systems Theory emphasises that families function as emotional units, with sibling relationships acting as key components (sibling subsystem) and can influence individuals across generations. Therefore when examining a specific dyad or triad, clinicians must consider the broader context and the various influences shaping sibling dynamics.

Sibling dynamics are also shaped by attachment patterns and relational warmth, with positive sibling interactions fostering emotional regulation, and resilience. Conversely, a child with insecure sibling experiences may approach new social situations with increased fear or distrust, potentially leading to internalising and externalising challenges.

Sibling behaviours can be understood through structural family therapy, which focuses on family hierarchies, subsystems, and boundaries, highlighting the importance of strong parental systems. Changes in one subsystem, like parenting stress or negative parenting, can affect the entire family, emphasising the need to consider contextual factors such as life stressors and family dynamics when addressing sibling issues.

Through social learning theory, children tend to imitate those who display warmth and care, hold higher status in the family, or share similarities with them. Siblings and caregivers influence behaviour through modelling, such as conflict management or praise for cooperation, with older siblings and same-gender siblings often serving as role models. Social learning theory suggests that sibling behaviour modelling varies based on sibling age and gender, with larger age gaps giving older siblings more power and influence in shaping behaviours.

Overall, a holistic understanding of sibling relationships requires attention to broader family dynamics, parenting styles, and cultural influences to support families and sibling relationships.

## Recommendations

- Clinicians must consider the interplay between culture and family dynamics, recognizing sibling relationships within broader cultural contexts. Understanding cultural differences is essential to avoid imposing biases and misinterpreting diverse family perspectives as dysfunctional.
- A need for more diverse research that includes underrepresented groups and contexts to help clinicians and researchers better understand family dynamics and develop interventions that are effective across different populations. Expanding the scope of research will provide deeper insights into the nuances of various family settings.
- Clinicians should look at ways to reduce coercive, punitive and harsh parenting styles and instead find ways to increase positive parenting such as enhancing relational warmth within parent-child and sibling relationships, as evidence has highlighted the positive and regulating environments warmth fosters.
- Additionally, future research should include the roles of all family members to achieve a more holistic view of family systems, dynamics and influences.
- Clinicians should also consider paying attention to vulnerable siblings who may not present with externalising symptoms but are at risk of experiencing internalising challenges. By nurturing and strengthening sibling relationships, clinicians can promote resilience and support a lifelong connection and protective factor.