

Fact Sheet



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1787 Neil Avenue
Columbus, Ohio 43210

Strong Families ... Strong Futures

Adult Sibling Relationships

Joyce A. Shriner

Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences
Ohio State University Extension, Hocking County

For years, researchers have been interested in childhood sibling relationships. They have studied sibling attachments, rivalry, birth-order and many other related topics. As the average age in America increases, so does the interest in adult sibling relationships. Today, siblings “spend a much longer period of their lives together than ever before. While one might spend forty to fifty years with one’s parents, life with a sibling can last sixty to eighty years” (Bank & Kahn, 1997, p. 13).

There are two theories that help to explain why many sibling relationships continue throughout adulthood. One is based on the norms that parents teach their children. For example, a parent may say, “You should be loving, kind and helpful toward your brother and sister.” The second theory is based on attachment. Siblings feel comfortable in attached relationships. They want to be in contact with each other and feel content when they are together. Real or threatened separations upset them. In a nationwide study of 7,700 adults who had at least one living biological sibling, White and Riedmann (1992 as cited in Cicirelli, 1995, p. 54) learned that approximately 50 percent “reported seeing or talking with their sibling at least monthly.” The amount of contact was highest between pairs of sisters and lowest between pairs of brothers. Brother-sister pairs fell between the other two groups. As might be anticipated, siblings who live closer have more contact. Those who lived within two miles of each other had the most contact. The eldest child as well as siblings with higher incomes and educations and those with a living parent reported the most frequent contact. White and Riedmann

(1992, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) also found that biological siblings living in blended families, half-siblings, and step-siblings reported less close relationships.

Types of Sibling Relationships

One researcher, Gold (1989 as cited in Cicirelli, 1995), described five types of sibling relationships based on their involvement with each other. They included “the intimate, the congenial, the loyal, the apathetic, and the hostile” (p. 59).

Intimate siblings are especially close and extremely devoted. They value their relationship above all others. Congenial siblings are friends. They are close and caring but place a higher value on their marriage and parent-child relationships. Loyal siblings base their relationship on their common family history. They maintain regular, periodic contact, participate in family gatherings, and support each other during times of crisis. Apathetic siblings feel indifferent toward each other. They rarely are in contact. Hostile sibling relationships are based on anger, resentment, and very negative feelings.

In Gold’s sample, 14 percent of sibling relationships were intimate, 30 percent loyal, 34 percent congenial, 11 percent apathetic, and 11 percent hostile. Scott (1990 as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) replicated Gold’s study and found that 95 percent of her participants had either intimate, loyal, or congenial relationships while the remaining 5 percent were apathetic. None of her sample had a hostile sibling relationship.

How Sibling Relationships Change Throughout Adulthood

Although most researchers agree that sibling relationships change as individuals move through adulthood, they disagree about how the relationships shift. Bedford (1990, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) described an “hourglass effect in sibling involvement, in which sibling closeness as well as interaction gradually decrease in early adulthood, are low in the middle adult years, and rise again in late adulthood and old age” (p. 60). This contrasts with White and Riedmann’s (1992, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) findings that frequency of contact decreased with age in early adulthood, stabilized during middle adulthood, and declined sharply in later adulthood. Interestingly, the respondents viewed their sibling as a close friend through the life cycle. Another researcher, Cicirelli, (1985, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) found that sibling rivalry decreases and feelings of closeness increased with age. It is believed that the conflicting results may be due to differences in research measures and sampling methods as well as the cross-sectional nature of the studies.

Sibling Relationships and Well-Being

For years, investigators have been interested in the effect sibling relationships have on well-being throughout adulthood. In a pioneering study, Cumming and Henry (1961 as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) “found that older people with living siblings had higher morale” (p. 63). In the study he conducted in 1977 (as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) Cicirelli found that elderly men with sisters were more emotionally secure than those without sisters, while women with sisters were encouraged and inspired in their social roles. Interestingly, McGhee (1985, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995) found that the “frequency of interaction was unrelated to the well-being of older people but that the existence and potential availability of a sister was related to greater life satisfaction” (p. 63). A study that Cicirelli conducted confirmed McGhee’s findings. “Cicirelli (1989, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995, p. 63) found that the perception of a close bond to sisters by either men or women was related to well-being, as indicated by fewer symptoms of depression, while a close bond to brothers seemed to have

little relevance for well-being.” It seems probable “that women’s emotional expressiveness and their traditional roles as nurturers account for the importance of relationships with sisters” (Cicirelli, 1989 as cited in Cicirelli, 1995, p. 64).

Roles of Adult Siblings

Siblings provide different types of support for each other as they age. As losses increase with age, siblings rely on each other more and more for social support.

One researcher, Goetting (1986, as cited in Cicirelli, 1995), believes that the amount of help that siblings give each other during adulthood and old age is based on their childhood and adolescent relationships. Once they leave home as young adults, the amount of help that they give one another is based on the similarity of their roles and their feelings of affection. During early and middle adulthood, they provide companionship, emotional support, and occasionally financial support for each other. They can usually be relied on for help during times of crisis, and typically cooperate with each other in order to care for their elderly parents. With advanced age, support from siblings becomes more important. Many rely on and appreciate visits and telephone calls and especially value assistance “when the brother or sister was ill, needed transportation, needed household repairs, or lost a spouse” (p. 116).

The Future of Adult Sibling Relationships

As we enter the 21st century, we can predict the need for strong adult sibling relationships. As the baby-boom generation ages and the cost of long-term health care increases, adult siblings will need to cooperate in order to care for their elderly parents and each other. We can prepare for the demands of the future by building strong sibling relationships today.

Sources

Bank, D. P., & Kahn, M. D. (1997). *The sibling bond*. New York: Basic Books.

Cicirelli, V. G. (1995). *Sibling relationships across the life span*. New York: Plenum Press.

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:
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