

COPMI

Keeping families in mind

GEMS

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Gateway to Evidence that Matters

Quick Facts

- Children with supportive sibling relationships function better throughout life.
- Parents can help their children have positive relationships with their siblings.
- When parents are depressed, they may be less able to promote strong relationships between their children. Thus, in families with parental depression, warm and supportive sibling relationships may be less common, relative to families without a depressed parent.
- Positive sibling relationships may protect children from some of the negative effects associated with chronic family stress, such as parental depression.
- Interventions targeting families with parental depression should attend to sibling relationships and support positive connections between brothers and sisters.

Sibling relationships in children of depressed parents

Sibling relationships

Sibling relationships generally are individuals' longest-lasting and most intense social connections¹. Through relationships with their siblings, children learn to interact with peers and to manage conflict². While the quality of sibling relationships may be influenced by individual characteristics such as gender as well as structural family variables (e.g. birth order), it seems that family processes have a more substantial influence on how well children get along with their siblings^{3,4}. Significantly, sibling closeness is connected to children's favourable adjustment⁵ and may help them to cope with family stressors⁶. Unfortunately, to date, most efforts to promote health in children in stressed families target improving relationships between parents, or interactions between parents and children, but not between siblings⁷.

Sibling relationships in families with parental depression

Although literature on sibling relationships in the context of parental depression is scarce, both research on parental depression and research on sibling relationships suggest that parental depression has negative effects on the quality of the sibling bond.

We know that depressed parents are less likely than non-depressed parents to be emotionally expressive toward their children^{8,9}, and that when parents show less warmth and attention to their children, their children report more difficult sibling relationships¹⁰. Likewise, we know that depressed parents are more likely to experience marital conflict¹¹, which is associated with sibling conflict⁴.

Unfortunately, we do not have direct evidence that children living with a depressed parent report negative sibling relationships. However, in a sample of rural African American families, Brody and colleagues¹² found an indirect association between parental psychological functioning (combined depressive symptoms and self-esteem) and sibling relationship quality, through links to family relationship quality and parenting practices. This research suggests that parenting practices associated with parental depression may negatively influence the strength of the sibling relationship, which, in turn, may adversely influence children's long-term adjustment.

Buffering effects of sibling relationships

Children who reported strong sibling relationships were less likely to report feeling depressed two years after exposure to high levels of stressful life events, compared to children who experienced a similar level of stressful life events but who did not report close sibling relationships⁶. In fact, warm and supportive sibling relationships may compensate for some of the negative effects of stressful life events that are experienced by many children throughout development, such as moving to a new home, experiencing the illness of a family member, or parental divorce⁶, although this may not hold in all socioeconomic contexts¹³. For example, in a qualitative, retrospective study of undergraduates who were interviewed about their sibling relationships before, during and after their parents divorced, Bush and Ehrenberg¹⁴ found that siblings who felt closer to one another were able to provide each other with support and

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Resources

Siblings Australia see <http://www.siblingsaustralia.org.au/> provides support for brothers and sisters of people with special needs including disability, chronic illness and mental health issues.

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comfort that helped them to cope with family stress. New research on the buffering effects of strong sibling relationships in families with parental depression is underway. We are hopeful that this research will direct efforts to develop family-based interventions that aim to enhance sibling relationship quality.

Limitations

Although we know that strong sibling relationships are important for healthy child development, and that parental depression interferes with parenting practices that are associated with strong sibling relationships, we are not aware of literature to date that examines directly the effects of parental depression on sibling relationship quality. Likewise, while

we can draw conclusions from the literature on divorcing families regarding the possible buffering effects of strong sibling relationships in families with parental depression, to date we do not know of studies that address this issue directly. Clearly, future research is needed in this area, as it may well be that siblings in families of parents with mental illness represent an untapped resource for preventive and treatment efforts.

Practice Implications

Interventions targeting families living with parental depression need to attend to sibling relationships and promote supportive connections between brothers and sisters.