



# The siblings relationship of adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities

Gazi Begum, Jan Blacher\*

Graduate School of Education, University of California, Riverside, 900 University Avenue, Riverside, CA 92521, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The sibling relationship of adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities was examined. Participants were 70 sibling dyads – each dyad was comprised of one 12-year old adolescent with ( $N = 23$ ) or without intellectual disabilities ( $N = 47$ ). Sibling relationships, behavior problems, and social skills were assessed using mother reports. Results revealed three findings. First, for typically developing adolescents, mothers reported more warmth in the sibling relationship for opposite sex dyads. For adolescents with intellectual disabilities, mothers reported more warmth in the sibling relationship for same-sex dyads. Second, for typically developing adolescents, mothers reported more status/power differences when the sibling was younger than when the sibling was older. For adolescents with intellectual disabilities, birth order did not affect status/power in the sibling relationship. Third, for typically developing adolescents, conflict was related to internalizing behavior problems. For adolescents with intellectual disabilities, conflict was related to externalizing behavior problems. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Family members and the complex relationships among them play a critical role in the development of children with disabilities. However, family studies primarily focus on the parent–child relationship (Baker et al., 2003; Stack, Serbin, Enns, Ruttle, & Barrieau, 2010). The limited research on the sibling relationship focuses more often on how the sibling with a disability affects his/her typically developing (TD) brother and/or sister (Eisenberg, Baker, & Blacher, 1998; Ishizaki et al., 2005; McHale & Gamble, 1989; Orsmond & Seltzer, 2009; Petalas, Hastings, Nash, Lloyd, & Dowe, 2009; Wolf, Fisman, Ellison, & Freeman, 1998). There is much less known about how TD siblings contribute to the development of individuals with intellectual disability (ID). The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to examine differences in the sibling relationship for adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities and (2) to examine how the sibling relationship impacts the adjustment of adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities.

### 1.1. The sibling relationship

The sibling relationship has been conceptualized in the literature along four dimensions, including warmth, conflict, rivalry, and relative status/power (Furman & Buhrmester, 1985). Previous research has established that children with disabilities influence the endorsement of these factors (Doody, Hastings, O'Neil, & Grey, 2010; Schuntermann, 2007; Stoneman, 2001, 2005). With regard to warmth, Stoneman's (2001, 2005) review of the literature reported that the

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 951 827 3875; fax: +1 951 827 3942.

E-mail addresses: gbegu001@ucr.edu (G. Begum), jan.blacher@ucr.edu (J. Blacher).

relationship between children with disabilities and their siblings is generally positive, if not more positive, than those between typically developing siblings.

Unlike warmth, no generalizations can be drawn regarding the level and intensity of conflict that siblings experience. Previous research has shown less conflict (Fisman, Wolf, Ellison, Freeman, & Szatmari, 1996; Floyd, Purcell, Richardson, & Kupersmidt, 2009; Kaminsky & Dewey, 2001) or more conflict (Bagenholm & Gillberg, 1991; Ross & Cuskelly, 2006; Stoneman, Brody, Davis, & Crapps, 1989) in the sibling relationship when one child has a disability. With regard to rivalry, several studies have shown that siblings perceived their mothers to be more partial to the child with the disability (Bagenholm & Gillberg, 1991; Bischoff & Tingstrom, 1991; Cicirelli, 1994; McHale & Harris, 1992; McHale, Sloan, & Simeonsson, 1986; Pit-ten-Cate & Loots, 2000; Sanders, 2004). Finally, when there is a child with a disability, parents often perceive greater status/power differential in the sibling relationship (Bischoff & Tingstrom, 1991; Floyd et al., 2009).

### *1.2. The role of the sibling relationship in the development of typically developing children*

Research with disabled-typical dyads suggests that the quality of the sibling relationship is related to the adjustment of typically developing children. Currently, there are inconsistent findings regarding how children with disabilities affect their typically developing siblings. There are some studies that report a negative sibling impact. For example, siblings of children with disabilities have been reported to have more externalizing behavior problems (Ishizaki et al., 2005; Petalas et al., 2009) internalizing behavior problems (Fisman et al., 1996; Ishizaki et al., 2005; Lobato, Kao, & Plante, 2005; Orsmond & Seltzer, 2009; Sharpe & Rossiter, 2002), social problems (Bagenholm & Gillberg, 1991; Sharpe & Rossiter, 2002), and academic problems (Hannah & Midlarsky, 1985; Sanders, 2004) than siblings of children without disabilities.

However, not all studies have reported a negative sibling impact. Some studies have shown that siblings of children with disabilities are indistinguishable from their peers. For example, a meta-analysis by Rossiter and Sharpe (2001) found that the difference between siblings of children with intellectual disabilities and siblings of typically developing children in terms of psychological adjustment was small (effect size =  $-.03$ ). Researchers have also reported on the positive impact of growing up with a brother or sister with a disability. Specifically, siblings of children with disabilities showed increased tolerance for differences, higher levels of empathy, more maturity, greater sense of responsibility, more self-confidence, and a greater appreciation of their own health and intelligence than siblings of children without disabilities (Cicirelli, 1994; Grossman, 1972; Powell & Ogle, 1985).

### *1.3. Criticisms of previous research and contribution of the present study*

There are two major limitations in the sibling disability literature. First, constellation variables (age, age spacing, gender, birth order, and whether the dyad is same sex or opposite sex) are not often accounted for when examining differences in the sibling relationship for children with and without intellectual disabilities. However, these factors may affect the quality of the sibling relationship. For example, the impact of a caretaking role on the sibling relationship is contingent on age. For typical siblings younger than the sibling with ID, greater caretaking responsibilities were associated with less conflict (Stoneman, 2001; Stoneman, Brody, Davis, & Crapps, 1991), whereas for older typical siblings, greater caretaking responsibilities were associated with more conflict (Stoneman, Brody, Davis, & Crapps, 1988) in the sibling relationship. In addition, sisters assume more caretaking responsibilities than brothers (Powell & Ogle, 1985; Stoneman et al., 1988).

The second major limitation is that a majority of sibling disability research focuses on how a child with a disability affects his/her typically developing siblings (Mandleco, Olsen, Dyches, & Marshall, 2003; Petalas et al., 2009; Pit-ten-Cate & Loots, 2000; Rossiter & Sharpe, 2001). However, given the increased behavior problems (Blacher & McIntyre, 2006; Eisenhower, Baker, & Blacher, 2005; McDermott et al., 1996; McIntyre, Blacher, & Baker, 2006) and social deficits (Dallas, Stevenson, & McGurk, 1993b; Guralnick, Neville, Hammond, & Conner, 2007; McIntyre et al., 2006) of children with disabilities, it is important to examine if and how the sibling relationship can contribute to the adjustment of children with ID. For them, the nature of the sibling relationship may be even more critical, given their limited social sphere (Guralnick et al., 2007; Kemp & Carter, 2002; Stoneman et al., 1991).

The purpose of the present study was to explore the sibling relationship of adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities with three research questions: (1) to what extent do disability status and constellation variables moderate the sibling relationship quality of warmth, conflict, rivalry, and status/power? (2) to what extent do warmth, conflict, rivalry, and status/power relate to behavior problems in adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities? (3) to what extent do warmth, conflict, rivalry, and status/power relate to social skills for adolescents with and without intellectual disabilities?

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

Participants were from a larger longitudinal study that included samples from Pennsylvania and California. The goal of the larger study was to examine family, school, and child contributions to the emergence of behavior disorders in children with and without intellectual disabilities. For clarification purposes, “target” refers to the adolescents with intellectual disabilities or control adolescents without intellectual disabilities. “Sibling” refers to the brother or sister closest in age to the target adolescent.

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