

# CHILDREN'S SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS:

*Developmental and Clinical Issues*



*Edited by*  
**FRITS BOER**  
**JUDY DUNN**

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## **Developmental and Clinical Issues**

Edited by  
Frits Boer  
*University of Leiden, The Netherlands*  
Judy Dunn  
*The Pennsylvania State University*



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# Foreword: Sibling Studies and Sibling Lore

Philip D. A. Treffers  
*University of Leiden*

Scientific interest in siblings is a recent development. This is surprising, because siblings have held an important place in numerous legends throughout history. The ancient Egyptian story of the love between Isis and her brother Osiris—from whom the Egyptian pharaohs are descended—is one of the oldest known. The theme returns later in Mozart's *Magic Flute* and in Robert Musil's greatest work, *The Man Without Qualities*.

At the beginning of the 17th century, in his essay, *Of Parents and Children*, Francis Bacon referred to the position of siblings in the family: "A man shall see, where there is a house full of children, one or two of the eldest respected, and the youngest made wantons; but in the midst some that are as it were forgotten, who many times nevertheless prove the best."

Brothers and sisters play a role in the work of almost all the great writers. In one of his touching letters to his wife, Italo Svevo wrote, "I agree with Tolstoy—and Tolstoy also was an old man when he came to this conclusion—that the simplest relationships are those between brother and sister." In Svevo's novel *Una Burla Riuscita* [A Successful Joke] the—anything but simple—relation between two old brothers stood central. And in *Confessions of Zeno* he wrote about the complicated interactions existing among three sisters. Svevo's three sisters lead us effortlessly to Chekhov . . . and one is tempted to associate further, because it is not difficult at all to call to mind other important books in which sibling relationships are described or even form a central theme. I cannot resist the temptation to quote once more from one of my favorite books, *Speak, Memory*, in which Vladimir Nabokov (1989) described his slightly younger brother:

He is a mere shadow in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections. I was the coddled one; he, the witness of coddling. (. . .) As a child, I was rowdy, adventurous and something of a bully. He was quiet and listless, and spent much more time with our mentors than I. At ten, began his interest in music (. . .) and [he] spent hours on end playing snatches of operas, on a upstairs piano well within earshot. I would creep up behind and prod him in the ribs—a miserable memory. (p 257)

If the study of siblings can teach us anything, it is how multifaceted and fascinating the relationship between brothers and sisters is. Although researchers in the past gave passing attention to this relationship, it is only during the last decade that sibling research has emerged on a larger scale. The work of Judy Dunn, professor of human development at The Pennsylvania State University is well-known: She could be considered the godmother of research in the area of siblings.

Frits Boer, lecturer at the University of Leiden, began research into siblings in 1987. The findings of this research are reported in his doctoral thesis, *Sibling Relationships in Middle Childhood: An Empirical Study* (1990). His work can be considered a sequel in a Leiden tradition: The founder of child psychiatry in Leiden, Dirk Arnold van Krevelen, wrote his doctoral dissertation on *The Only Child*. This book was published in 1946, so the time had come for a sibling!

It was at the time of Frits Boer's graduation that the first international symposium on siblings was held at Leiden University. Scientists from the whole world presented the results of research in this field, including studies of the relationships between siblings, and studies of only children. These contributions are collected in this book, which offers a unique overview of the state of the art of sibling research.

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# Introduction

Judy Dunn

*The Pennsylvania State University*

To many practicing clinicians, and indeed to most parents, it is obvious that the relationship between siblings is one characterized by distinctive emotion and intimacy from infancy onwards. It is a relationship that offers children unique opportunities for learning about self and other, and one that has considerable potential for affecting children's well-being, intimately linked as it is to the relationship each child has with the shared parents. Yet, the significance of siblings in children's development was, until the 1980s, a neglected topic in systematic research. This neglect seems particularly surprising given the interest that clinicians and family systems theorists have expressed in the part that siblings play in family relationships and in the adjustment of individuals (e.g., Levy, 1937; Minuchin, 1988; Petty, 1953; Winnicott, 1964), and given the importance that Piagetian theory attributes to children's interactions with other children. More recently there has been a welcome increase in research on siblings, and the contributions to this volume—originally presentations to the First International Symposium on Siblings held in Leiden, in December 1990—illustrate some of the exciting directions that this new interest is taking.

The first half of the book focuses on developmental issues. The first chapter (by Dunn) provides an overview of the issues in sibling research that are currently receiving particular attention: developmental changes in sibling relationships during early childhood and the nature of sibling relations in middle childhood; the links between sibling relationships and those with parents, peers, and friends; the influence of sibling relationships on individual outcome and adjustment; and the impact on children of growing up with disabled or sick

siblings. Each of these issues is examined in detail in later chapters, and some topics—the connections between parent-child and sibling relationships, for instance—recur throughout the volume. A striking development in the last few years has been the growth of interest in siblings during middle childhood. In chapter 2, Buhrmester discusses the developmental changes that take place in their relationship as children move through middle childhood and adolescence, setting the developmental trajectory within the framework of children's other relationships—those with parents and those with peers. His focus makes clear that gender and age segregation are important issues for both peer *and* sibling relationships over this period, in contrast to the findings on siblings during the preschool period.

In chapters 3, by Boer, Goedhart, and Treffers, and 4, by Bryant, the connections between parent-child relationships and sibling relationships come center stage. The intriguing proposal that a poor relationship with a parent can be compensated for by the relationship with a sibling is seriously called into question in the chapter by Boer and his colleagues, which focuses on a study of a nonclinical population; specific differences in the emotional support provided by the two relationships are highlighted by Bryant. In view of the vast differences between the parent-child relationship and sibling relationships—differences in nature, in dynamics, in development, and in their developmental implications—it is difficult to see how one could possibly compensate for the other—if compensation implies substitution—except in a very global sense. The developmental issues raised in these chapters—for example, Bryant's focus on siblings as providers of support for unhappy siblings—have many implications for those concerned with the care of children.

The notion of compensation is seen in a different light in Falbo's discussion of only children (chapter 5). She succinctly shows that the widely held and damaging views of only children are strikingly inaccurate. Only children are in fact no different from those with siblings on a wide variety of personality and adjustment measures. Does this imply that siblings have no developmental impact? Not necessarily. Falbo argues that parents compensate for the absence of siblings with their especially close relations with their only children, and outlines a study of Chinese families that provides a striking comparison with the American and European data on only children. Such comparisons between cultures are very much needed: We slip too easily into generalizations about family relationships based only on our own cultures.

In the second half of the book we move to more explicitly clinical concerns, considered in the context of research findings (McHale & Harris, chapter 6; and Jenkins, chapter 9) and their practical implications for those in a clinical role (Gath, chapter 7; Vandereycken & Van Vreckem, chapter 8; and Bank, chapter 10). Three themes are prominent. The first is the possible vulnerability of children with disabled or sick siblings (discussed by McHale & Harris, Gath, and Vandereycken & Van Vreckem), or those in disharmonious homes

(discussed by Jenkins). The second, in marked contrast, is the positive supportive role that children can play for their troubled or ill siblings, discussed in the chapters by Jenkins and Vandereycken and Van Vreckem. On this issue there is an encouraging accumulation of findings showing that *some* siblings can and do function in supportive and helpful ways. Siblings have been seen in the literature on many disorders as having only a marginal role, as Vandereycken and Van Vreckem demonstrate, but it is chiefly the *problems* caused to the non-sick sibling that have been studied. In contrast, Vandereycken and Van Vreckem show us that children can have a very positive role in helping their siblings. They make the important point that the patterns of impact on siblings may differ very much in families with different problems. More research that takes account of the variation in how families deal with disabled or sick members is badly needed.

The third theme is that recurring motif of the links between these different sibling roles and experiences, and the parents' differing relationships with their different children (Bank, Gath, McHale & Harris, and Vandereycken & Van Vreckem). The significance of children's *perceptions* of differential parental behavior is emphasized by McHale and Harris on the basis of their findings on children with disabled siblings, and this valuable point illustrates a more general matter: The lessons of the chapters that focus on clinical issues are useful, also, for those attempting to understand normal developmental principles. McHale and Harris draw our attention to the fact that it was children's interpretation of what was happening to them, and of the behavior of their disabled sibling, that was linked to their adjustment; the lesson here is surely not confined to children with disabled siblings.

The chapters throughout this book lead us to question some of the usual assumptions concerning family experiences—assumptions about only children, about the impact of a disabled sibling, and about the compensation that one relationship can provide for another. They bring to light important developmental principles in highlighting the significance of relative and nonshared experiences within the family, the role of perceptions and attributions, and the range of different processes that link different relationships. They remind us that, although the complexity of the questions we try to answer in studying children's development is daunting, careful systematic study can begin to shed light on those questions. If we are to understand children's development and gain insight into ways to help them, we have to include siblings—as part of their family world—in that study.

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# Developmental Issues

# Sisters and Brothers: Current Issues in Developmental Research

Judy Dunn

*The Pennsylvania State University*

The idea that siblings can play an important role in children's development has a long history: brothers and sisters appear as significant figures in folk stories and in classical and biblical writing, and they are conspicuous in many biographical and autobiographical accounts of childhood and adolescence. Even though they figure prominently in our cultural stories and accounts of individual development, they have received scant attention from developmental psychologists until relatively recently. Since about the 1980s, the volume of research on siblings by both developmental psychologists and clinicians has grown rapidly, spanning a wide array of developmental issues. In this chapter I consider some of the chief themes in this work: the nature of sibling relationships and how they change with development, individual differences in sibling relationships, the links between sibling relationships and parent-child and peer relationships, sibling relationships and individual adjustment and outcome, and sibling relationships in special populations.

## THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

Research into the nature of sibling relationships has made especially vigorous progress in two domains, namely, the study of developmental changes in the relationships of young siblings and the study of siblings' relationships in middle childhood. Before considering these, we should note that there has been

much progress on the issue of how we can best measure the relationship of siblings of different ages (e.g., Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Dunn, Stocker, & Plomin, 1990a), and a new awareness of the importance of obtaining assessments of the relationship from different family members and sources (e.g., Boer, 1990).

How does the relationship between siblings change as children develop greater powers of understanding and communicating with each other? It is clear that, during the early years, there are marked changes in the nature of the relationship. Younger siblings play an increasingly active role in the relationship during the preschool years (Munn & Dunn, 1988), and their older siblings begin to take an increasing interest in them some time between their third and fourth birthday (Brown & Dunn, *in press*). The nature of collaboration and cooperation with an older sibling change as children reach 4 years old, and these studies also strongly suggest that sibling relationships become more important in children's sociocognitive development by the time they are 4—and become both effective companions and effective antagonists. Furthermore, children's efforts become more efficacious as they intervene in mother-sibling interactions, making them more active participants in family life (Dunn & Shatz, 1989).

Particularly exciting is the increased interest in the sibling relationship in middle childhood. We have learned that sibling relationships become more egalitarian during middle childhood, though there is some disagreement about whether the change reflects a decrease in the dominance both siblings attempt to exert (Buhrmester, *this volume*; Buhrmester & Furman, 1987) or an increase in the power exerted by younger siblings on their older siblings (Vandell, Minnett, & Santrock, 1987). There is also some inconsistency in the reports on changes in closeness and conflict, with Vandell and her colleagues reporting an increase in positive emotional tone and conflict between 8 and 11 years, and Buhrmester and his colleagues finding little change in intimacy and affection but a decline in companionship between 8 and 17 years. The changes in age depend on whether it is the perceptions of older or younger siblings that are being documented; the argument put forward by Buhrmester, that the changes in warmth during adolescence parallel those found for perceptions of relationships with parents, and are likely to reflect increasing involvement with peers outside the family, is a convincing one.

On the issue of whether there is stability in the development of the way siblings relate to one another over the period when they move into middle childhood and adolescence, we remain in need of more information. In our own studies of children in Cambridge, England, the correlations over a 4-year period (from the preschool to middle childhood periods) were for the positive aspects of the relationship,  $r(40) = .42$  and  $r(40) = .60$ , for the younger and older siblings, respectively, and for the negative aspects of the relationship,  $r(40) = .28$  and  $r(40) = .43$ . Although these correlations are significant, and we could