

Sibling relationships and parental conflict in divorced families



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Over the past decades interest on social relationships has increased, including siblings relationships. Many studies were carried out covering how sibling relationships affect aspects of life including academic achievement and rivalry, and the different aspects that affected this including age gaps, gender and birth order. According to Connidis (1994), siblings stand ready to help each other in times of need. When there's a serious family problem or crisis, they provide companionship and support.

Previous studies of sibling relationships have found they play an important role not only in family life, but by influencing the way that the family functions within society (Cicirelli, 1994). Other factors are believed to affect how siblings engage with each other, such as age, gender and birth order. Research shows that an age gap of two-four years between siblings may be optimal for greater mental stimulation from one another while reducing conflict (Dunn, 1984). It is recognised that age differences between siblings provide earlier-born children with greater ability to control sibling interaction. (Perlman et al, 2000).

Other research has studied how divorce affects sibling relationships and parent-child relationships. " The assumption has been made that the trauma <https://assignbuster.com/sibling-relationships-and-parental-conflict-in-divorced-families/>

from divorce is likely to result in poorly socialised, cognitively deficient children who experience poor parent-child relationships.” (Hammer & Turnover, 1990, Pg 194). The position holds that the long-term effects of divorce on children are quite debilitating and the negative burden can be carried years after the divorce psychologically and through interpersonal relationships.(e. g., Glenn, 2001; Popenoe, 1993, 2003; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000), however this is little tested.

More recent research is showing that parental conflict poses more harm to children’s relationships than the process of divorce itself. Empirical studies have identified several mechanisms that may account for the associations between inter-parental conflict and maladjustment in children, including traumatic stress, physical and psychological symptoms, academic problems, social competence, and the internalization and externalization of problems. (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cummings & Davies, 1994; Emery, 1982; Forehand, Neighbors, Devile, & Armistead, 1994; Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990; Grych, Harold, & Miles, 2003; Grych, Jouriles, Swank, McDonald, & Norwood, 2000; Harold & Conger, 1997).

Literature review of how Divorce affects sibling relationships

Little research has been focussed on the sibling relationships in divorce, tending to focus more on the attachment of the parent-child after. (Abbey & Dallos, 2004). ‘Sibling relationships provide a unique and important contribution to a child’s development’ (Dunn, 2000; McElwain & Volling, 2005). Social relationships between siblings have been researched with both a positive and negative outlook. This literature states the experience of

parental divorce brings siblings closer together, whereas the second perspective argues that parental divorce drives them apart and supports a negative outlook. (eg., Riggio, 2001). As Hetherington (2006) argues, it is possible that divorce can allow for more successful relationships and personal growth due to the release from conflict.

A recent study was designed to discover the effects of divorce on siblings through to adulthood, as they criticised most current studies had focussed on sibling relationships in childhood and adolescence (e. g., Amato, 1987; Mackinnon, 1989) or young adulthood (Mivelsky, 2004; Riggio, 2001). Majority of research studies have shown divorce to have a negative impact on sibling relationships, including (MacKinnon, 1989; Panish & Stricker, 2001; Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2004), who found sibling relationships are more hostile and conflicted, at a lower quality and with lower support in divorced families. Research suggests parental conflict associated with divorce can create stress for children, (Amato, 2000), which can affect them in two different ways. Firstly, the siblings may get closer, developing a sibling bond as support, (Bank and Kahn, 1982), or by transmuting stress into hostility and aggression towards other siblings, (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz & Simons, 1994).

The aim was to further the understanding of the effect of parental divorce on sibling relationships using three main aims, to assess divorce in adulthood, to understand how parental conflict affects the sibling bond and to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions which parental divorce is more or less detrimental to the sibling relationship. The literature discussed suggests divorce has a negative effect on sibling relationships, and so it was expected <https://assignbuster.com/sibling-relationships-and-parental-conflict-in-divorced-families/>

siblings to have less contact, more conflict and lower relationship quality than siblings from intact families, co-operating these three areas into their study.

8, 161 people were interviewed over a computer assessment, leading to a self-completion questionnaire. The responder and their sibling answered on a number scale, which covered the relationship quality, conflict and contact areas. Results showed to support the hypothesis, stating that for all aspects of the sibling relationship, parental conflict is found to be more of a determinant factor than divorce. It was found that when parents had more conflicts before divorce, siblings report less contact, more conflict, and a lower-quality relationship.

Another study (Frank, 2007) examined the effect of parental divorce on adult-children's relationships with siblings and parents. The results did not report to support previous findings that divorce negatively impacts on adult sibling relationships, though it supported the findings that parental-child relationships can be disrupted by conflict and divorce, (Ahrns & Tanner, 2003; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Aquilino, 1994; Cooney, 1994; Riggio, 2004). Frank (2007) selected 207 young adults from divorced and intact families, who completed varieties of questionnaires as well as measures of sibling relationship and parent-child relationships.

Parental divorce may disrupt not only ties between parents and children, but also between the children themselves. Sibling relationships are the longest-surviving family relationships and an important source of comfort and

support throughout the life course, (Campbell, Connidis, & Davies, 1999; Eriksen & Gerstel, 2002; Voorpostel, Van der Lippe, Dykstra, & Flap, 2007).

In general, studies investigating the effect of parental practices on sibling relationship quality have shown that positivity in parent-child relationships is associated with positive sibling relationships, whereas negativity in parent-child relations is associated with aggressive sibling behavior (Boer et al., 1992; Brody et al., 1987, 1994a, 1994b; Noller et al., 1995; Reese-Weber, 2000; Stocker et al., 1989). This suggests that sibling relations are congruent with rather than compensating for parent-child relationships (Boer et al., 1992).

My own study 2 pages

Research Rationale- ' Most studies focus on young or middle-childhood children, though interest in research on adolescent siblings is rapidly growing (e. g. Hetherington et al. 1999), but there is little longitudinal research in adulthood, or studies that take a life-course perspective. We are left comparatively ignorant of the long-term significance of early experiences with siblings'. Through various studies it is apparent there is little research in the field of longitudinal effects of divorce on sibling relationships into adulthood. Therefore I am designing a study to broaden knowledge and understanding on this area. Hypothesis is to show that the effect of divorce on sibling relationships does not deteriorate after the divorce in adulthood. It is plausible that the sibling competition dynamics, induced by parent-offspring conflict (Trivers, 1974), would not persist in adulthood, so my aim is to test this. It has been hypothesised that children model their parent's

actions and behaviours, so if parent's conflict, children may imitate this, affecting sibling relationships. (Maura et al 2010).

Methodology Rationale- I am going to look at whether being exposed to parental conflict (before divorce) causes the sibling bond to deteriorate, and whether the relationship is improved or worsened after divorce, given that siblings would no longer be exposed to parental conflict or at least at a lesser extent. This will be a longitudinal study, to assess the long-term effects on sibling relationships after divorce, as majority of research tends to focus more on childhood and adolescence rather than adulthood, so there is a defining gap in the research.

Method-

Design- A longitudinal study is best for measuring long-term effects. The independent variables are the age, the birth order and gender of the siblings as these can't be changed. The dependent variables are the amount of parental conflict, the quality of the relationship with the other sibling, as these amounts can be manipulated and will affect the outcome.

Participants- The participants need to meet 2 areas of criteria to be selected.

(1) Already filed for divorce and (2) Have more than one child, biological siblings or step. There will be an initial questionnaire to test the selected people meet this criteria for the study, and as a guidance of how much conflict is perceived by the couple. They will be selected on a voluntary basis having already filed for divorce, and asked by the professionals involved.

There will be a first selection questionnaire designed to eliminate participants who haven't got more than one child. After the initial

questionnaire I will select children that meet the designated criteria, (two parents, and more than one sibling). This allows comparison of relationships between siblings who are biologically related and step-related. The results may vary as other variables such as sibling rivalry may be involved, so questions allowing answering other factors will be designed in the questionnaire. The children will be asked to complete a questionnaire at varying times in their lives. They will be questioned about how they remember their relationship with their sibling before their parents had filed for divorce and at the present where their parents had filed divorce, again a few months after divorce, and then every 5 years until adulthood.

Materials- To ensure participants understand the study there will be an information sheet outlining details of the study. Then a form of consent will be signed by adult participants, and adults on behalf of children under 16, also by school professionals. As the study is longitudinal there may be a need to renew consent on a regular basis, according to BPS ethical guidelines. There will be a separate questionnaire for the parents, looking at the conflict between them and their partner, and another view of their children's relationship.

Procedure- I will aim the study at families who experience high levels of conflict but are not divorced. I will select couples who have filed for divorce, as this is most associated with high conflict. I am selecting 50 couples, all of which have 2 or more children. In this research the gender, race, geographical background, ethnicity, disability and age will be recorded to ensure the results provide data of all areas. This highlights factors that may need to be addressed, such as if the parents are disabled and need a <https://assignbuster.com/sibling-relationships-and-parental-conflict-in-divorced-families/>

different form of questionnaire to ensure their needs are being met. I am going to select siblings of which the youngest is no younger than 5 years old, as it would be difficult for younger children to answer the questions. The parents and children will have a questionnaire about the parental conflict and sibling relationships. The questionnaires will be repeated at different times throughout the child's life into adulthood using a retrospective approach analysis. Another perspective of the sibling relationship would give a deeper insight, therefore an observation at school and a questionnaire by the teacher would prove beneficial, of which I will need permission by the head teacher of the school and the teacher.

Ethics- Although it is voluntary based participation; the adults will have to provide permission for their children to be involved as well as themselves. They will also be aware they have the right to withdraw from the study at any given time, and they can have the results removed and destroyed at any point after the study with no further obligations. As previously mentioned, renewal of consent will be carried out to ensure the participant still wants to participate over the duration of the study and so they understand the nature of the study. The purpose is to fill a gap in present research in the field, and so is very valuable to science. The parents will be told they have the right to see their child's information throughout the study; however, they do not have the right to see other child's in order to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the other participants. Also to protect confidentiality, names in the study will remain anonymous throughout, and kept anonymous when storing the files. The participants will be kept updated with the study, of how it's

being recorded, other involvers and the outcomes, which may encourage compliance. (Breakwell, 2006)

Discussion-

The study is valuable to science and future research, as it was pointed there was a significant gap in adult sibling studies. As it is longitudinal it would give a deeper insight to relationships after divorce into adulthood, contributing highly to knowledge and understanding.

I have intended the study to have high validity and in turn high reliability, however, due to the changes that can happen through the time gaps taken between the questionnaires, it may make it less valid. For example, events such as remarriage, illness, moving home, education and environmental factors could all strain the sibling relationship. I have accounted for this in my questionnaires to make the validity as high as possible.

The limitations of this study are the results may over generalise households where conflict is in other places. For example, it is suggested that families with large numbers of children have more conflict than with less children. It is also researched that there are significant differences in age gaps, and gender differences within the sibling relationship, which although recorded in this study and could be used as a variable, it is not a focus and could make it more complex.

Another weakness is that because of the study across the years from pre-divorce until adulthood, it could take many years until completion. Due to long time commitments, it is possible participants may want to withdraw, when the children reach an age they give permission for themselves. Also <https://assignbuster.com/sibling-relationships-and-parental-conflict-in-divorced-families/>

the gaps between the questionnaires and interviews may prove inaccurate being for years, as it relies heavily on memory.

Parents may have control of the children's questionnaires until the child is older. The questionnaire will feature questions of the amount and intensity of parental conflict, of which parents may be dishonest about in order to portray a more positive image of home life. This makes the results more unreliable.