

Emotional Enrichment of Sibling Relationship

cand. Dr. Inés Brock, Psychotherapist for Children and Family Therapy, Degree in Early Childhood and Education, University of Applied Science Magdeburg-Stendal

Abstract:

This contribution deals with the special bonding between siblings. In the past, it has been asserted that the defining features of sibship are conflict and retardation. In spite of the fact that there is an experience of rivalry between siblings, this paper argues that the daily encounters between siblings influence every child emotionally. The focus here is the positive enhancement of having a brother or sister. The main argument deals with the encouragement and advancement in the sense of social referencing, which they give to each other. Siblings growing up in one family generate a sense of understanding and cooperate with each other on an emotional basis. They develop symmetrical reciprocity, dyadic coping and co-construction of reality. These three key categories are influenced by living together in the family of origin because of their dynamic on the horizontal level. Reasonable treatment is especially affected by emotions, therefore it is called emotional capital.

Theoretical Background of the Study:

Apart from parental rearing patterns, siblings influence a person's mode of bonding. The sibling relationship is the most long-lasting kinship relationship and the most intensive experience of closeness and intimacy during childhood. In particular, children's ability to develop resilience is tied to the richness of relationship experiences within the family. This is verified for example in transition research. "Transitions affect children in many ways including their own learning and development, and their relationship with their socio-cultural context at different times." (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006, S. 34) The relationship between young siblings generates and promotes self-esteem. "A positive self-concept is necessary for healthy development and learning ... Positive self-esteem depends on whether children feel that others accept them and see them as competent and worthwhile." (Pugh & Duffy, 2006, S. 115)

The skill to interact adequately with each other within the family helps the individual form strategies to cope with situations in dealing with others' feelings. They develop awareness and a distinguished notion of one another's inner representation. This can be considered a basis of social understanding.

For children, growing up in families with siblings results in manifold bonding and communication experiences, relieving the strain on parents in many respects. Siblings share time, space and knowledge, which leads to a unique intimacy. Communication rules and sympathy between siblings have a very special character without parental steering. Changing coalitions strengthen the siblings, regardless of age. Encouraging each other is an important psychological factor too. Loyalty arises in the family of origin. Stierlin¹ calls it the “crucial relations in the family”. The changing between taking and giving forms an inner represented justice and creates the feeling of being accepted. Love and the wish to be respected is the basis of social regularity. (following Parsons quoted after Flam) The accomplishment of exchange and negotiation generates emotional referencing. Emotional resilience could promote self esteem and empathy provided for one another. “Coleman’s significant contribution was to demonstrate, beyond doubt, the physical as well as the psychological impact of feelings of anxiety and unhappiness, or elation and euphoria, on our ability to function in everyday life.” (Moyles, 2007, S. 15) Even the youngest children have to manage their feelings and give names to their emotions. The most popular setting, in which to learn this, is the group setting with other siblings within the secure framework of parenting - within the primary socialization system of the family. Following Hochschild (quoted after Flam), the individuals who are interacting in everyday life construct their emotions and the social structures within the family framework. Every partner in interaction executes as well the self reflexive as the emphasizing emotions. In that manner something like emotional management is generated. Siblings provide this chance in dyadic and triadic communication sequences. Mutual positive enhancement promotes emotional resilience amongst siblings from the beginning of life onwards. Even infants play a very important role with their inborn interaction competence.

The lack of sociological research about early childhood sibship leads to insistence on old beliefs like the trauma of dethronement. My results will help to abolish this old prejudice. This can be demonstrated with the help of an explanation of the siblings’ inner notions of sharing daily routines as well as special challenging situations. First and foremost, siblings enrich each other in daily life situations and during play and exploration. These home experiences promote mental health and emotional capital to manage feelings in the right and appropriate way.

¹ Stierlin, Helm (2005) *Gerechtigkeit in nahen Beziehungen*. Heidelberg

The ability to read the minds and emotions of others is especially influenced by certain socialization experiences such as the “symbolic mentalizing ability; number of siblings and quality of relationships and pretend play with mothers and siblings.” (Taylor & Woodes, 2005, S. 64) Resilient features of emotional competence enable children to regulate emotions and use emotions positively. To avoid dysregulated coping it is necessary “to respond emotionally, yet simultaneously and strategically apply their knowledge about emotions and their expressions to relationships with others, so that they can negotiate interpersonal exchanges and regulate their emotional experiences... A loss of contact with emotions breaks down rationality which requires the support of our emotions. ” (Taylor & Woodes, 2005, S. 60) Siblings have got a lot of social interaction right from the beginning of their life to practice conversation and emotional feedback.

As we know: „In the early years of life the youngest child undergoes a reorientation from the parent to the sibling(s). There is markedly more interaction with the brothers and sisters and significantly less with the mother from about toddlerhood. ... It is a period when more positive aspects of the relationship begin to develop, and a relative stability of those positive features emerges.” (Sanders, 2004, S. 46) It has to be pointed out that there is an enormous need for research about sibling-sibling-interaction which can be supplied in the future only with the support of new approaches in asking children themselves. Social phenomena like emotional capital could only be explored in observing and analyzing daily routines and interaction in addition to other designs.

„Sibling relationships are created and maintained through talk, activities, rituals, unwritten conventions and constantly negotiated rules and practices, much like other family bonds and friendships, rather than being ‘natural’ and inevitable occurrences.” (Edwards R., Hadfield, Lucey, & Mauthner, 2006) In the research area of early child care and education there are a number of empirical studies dealing with such questions, but the family dynamic has not yet been an area of focus. (Yelland, 2005), (Fabian & Dunlop, 2006)

Research Methods

This paper is based on an empirical view in a micro-level analysis. In my thesis, I focused on families with more than one child. The special interest was to concentrate on the siblings’ dynamic within the family. „In the course of their play, children in subgroups constructed and shared rituals, routines, language and artifacts that served the inclusion-exclusion dynamic.” (Hatch, 2007, S. 164) I would like to ascertain how they enhance their understanding of cooperative play depending on inner notions of themselves and the family

system as a whole. The relationships of all family members were studied using an interpretivist approach.

Interpretivist scientists seek to understand the social world from the point of view of the child living in it. By the way of constructs and explanations, interpretivists attempt to make sense of how children understand their experiences and how this affects the way they feel towards others... Interpretative sociology encourages entering the child's world and meanings to get the child's perspective from the inside out. (Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2007, S. 54)

My research is based on theoretical findings and an empirical view into families. I've analyzed seven families in depth. In this family study I unearthed new evidence of these hypothesizes. The main assumption for getting valid data was giving authority to the child's point of view. In this qualitative case-study, a triangulation of four empirical methods were used. These instruments are especially appropriate to recover imaginations and stances. Their usefulness has been proven in the psychodynamic diagnosis in psychotherapeutic contexts. The children ages 4 and up were requested to engage in two of the four sessions. First the siblings work alone, then the whole family.

In the children's drawings ("Family in animals"- according to the instruction: *Imagine, I could conjure a magic spell on your family, which transmutes everyone into a special animal, what do you think your oldest brother would be? What could he do best?*) I could find out what their inner representations of the members of the family look like. Additionally some useful observation about their interaction and communication could be observed. Important sentences were written down and assessed.

The fourth session took place with the whole family. With the help of the so called Family board (a means to project the inner notions of family relations in a simple order on a 50x50cm board of wood with monothematic figures), I generated a differentiated understanding of the family processes and habitualized manners.² This qualitative assessment with two nonverbal projective psychological methods for younger children was combined with the analysis of a genogram (to recognize the intergenerational patterns) and with semi-standardized interviews with the parents (to understand their attitude and individual view of their family life). The sample consisted of 22 children between half a year old and 12 years old, 13 boys and 9 girls.

² Because of that nonverbal character of the data I can't quote here. The interpretation needed many pages every time.

The results of these diagnosis instruments from family and children therapy are summarized in a family reconstruction. Afterwards the coding in the computer program MaxQda starts and helps to analyze the data step by step to create the categories and key issues. The Grounded Theory of Strauss and Corbin constituted the generation of those categories.

Outcomes

Growing up with siblings brings many special advantages which I have called **Multiple Relationship Enhancement** (which means enrichment of interpersonal Relationships). This strengthening of resilience occurs in a horizontal level between siblings and is founded on strong family bonds and relationships.

Because of the complexity already highlighted, it is appropriate to concentrate on key codes.

In the following I will describe the three main categories that emerged out of the material.

1. Symmetrical reciprocity
2. Dyadic Coping
3. Co-construction of reality

The children act together without special adult instruction and adjust to each other in special interaction patterns. They create sense together, organize and complement one another. Within the projection in the drawings they initiate similar imaginations. This phenomenon is called integration of emotional resources and occurs from the older to the younger one and vice versa. This is one of the new consolidated findings. Children take care of each other and internalize that ability. The satisfaction of basic needs like nutrition and care play a very popular role in symmetrical reciprocity. Love and affection establish a power of strong attachment, which gives them the chance to be, for example, annoyed without the risk of losing the bond between the siblings. They belong together nevertheless. Sociologists until now have never described these issues of symmetrical reciprocity and dyadic coping outside of adult coupled pairs.

On the one hand, siblings take care of each other and consider the interests of one another. On the other hand, they react together in conflict situations. I observed and verified that they use special strategies to cope with such situations. When there is a conflict outside, they move closer although the conflict only concerns one of them. It is based on a dyadic appreciation of a state of mind and a conjoined definition of intention. The mutual agreement works because of processes of feedback where emotional availability, familial cohesion, reliability of the counterpart, intimacy and privacy exist. In the case studies, the children showed a strengthened manner of solving problems hands on together even in

difficult situations such as during the transition from the family setting to a child care institution - this is a crucial finding of interest to early child care institutions as well.

The siblings interact with language, touch, guidance and nonverbal understanding. Very interesting is the result that they complement each other independently of age. Even the presence of the younger sibling prevents fear and anxiety. Elder sisters help the subsequently born sibling but it works in reverse as well. They cope in dyadic teams, but sometimes all of them interact together as a team even against the parents.

The third code, which leads to a key category, is the co-construction of reality. In some other contexts such as early education settings this issue belonged to the theoretical framework of educational processes some years ago. You could not, however, find any conceptualization of this item amongst siblings. But indeed the first socialization instance – the family – prepared the ground for co-construction in life. Siblings acquire the knowledge of treatment in their specific world together, and they benefit from the experiences of their brothers and sisters especially in emotional self management.

Conclusion

One of my main results³ is the conceptualization of symmetrical reciprocity and dyadic coping, which is called emotional capital, between siblings. Siblings assist and enhance each other right from the beginning of life. Multiple Relationship Enhancement in this sense means that siblings not only support each other; but also they gather various stimulation to develop emotional capital, which helps in encountering all the challenges in childhood.

Summary:

- Siblings orientate themselves on each other in acquiring language, role-playing, socialization and imitation learning
- Siblings benefit from each other in the form of the development of empathy, social competence and strategies of conflict resolution
- Children demand justice in the family, gain frustration tolerance and knowledge of dependencies, show solidarity and behave with respect
- Siblings' coexisting competition intensified creativity and openness to experience
- Intimacy and love create affectionate closeness and manifold internal representation of attachment pattern (especially in the sib subsystem, in addition to parents-child-attachment)

³ Besides the parental categories.

This sociological phenomenon can be described as an enormous resilience factor. Siblings develop a specific dynamic relationship, which includes positive impacts on their development. The repertoire of social skills and affection, which are applied through and within siblings' interaction, can be regarded as a mental health factor during the time of growing up. These dynamics occur especially in the existentially relevant affiliation system – which means the belonging to the family of origin. This is the first place of emotional socialization in prompting and motivation.

When we recognize the relationship enhancements developed in large families we have to also recognize the prospect, that some of these cannot emerge in a society with a lack of siblings. Kinship could decrease in further generations. The outlook for a society poor in siblings is bleak; a circumstance which has not yet entered discourse on population policy. The social and emotional capital of a society and the openness to experience will be reduced when there is no solidarity experience. Childhood, as well as parenthood, will be much more difficult and parents and children lose self-esteem in managing social relations.

We should keep in mind that the development of social capital not only qualifies children to deal with complicated situations and develops their ability to resist difficult ones during the life span, but it also builds an emotional foundation, internalized reliability and certainty. The developmental tasks in the family and for the individual itself were supported by such skills like symmetric reciprocity, dyadic coping and co-construction of reality between siblings during early childhood and later on. They generate emotional resilience to face the challenges of life much better. It could be called "deep acting" (Hochschild again) to interpret sensations that lead to an affective socialization.

Bearing in mind these results we can look much more sensitive on relationships between peers. But they cannot substitute the experiences in the family of origin.

References

- Corbin, J. M. (2002). *Qualitative methods in evaluation: A Grounded Theory Perspektive. Hallesche Beiträge zur Gesundheits- und Pflegewissenschaft*. Halle.
- Edwards, R., Hadfield, L., Lucey, H., & Mauthner, M. (2006). *Sibling Identity and Relationships. Sisters and Brothers*. London.
- Fabian, H., & Dunlop, A.-W. (2006). *Transitions in the early years. debating continuity and progression for children in early education*. London and New York.
- Flam, Helena (2002) *Soziologie der Emotionen*. Konstanz.
- Greig, A., Taylor, J., & MacKay, T. (2007). *Doing Research with Children*. Los Angeles, London.
- Hatch, J. (2007). *Qualitative Research in early childhood settings*. London.
- Moyles, J. (2007). *Early Years Foundation. Meeting the Challenge*. Maidenhead.
- Pugh, G., & Duffy, B. (2006). *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Sanders, R. (2004). *Sibling Relationships. Theory and Issues for Practice*. New York: Palgrave.
- Strauss, A. L. (1998). *Grundlagen qualitativer Sozialforschung*. München: 2. Aufl.
- Taylor, J., & Woodes, M. (2005). *Early Childhood Studies. An Holistic Introduction*. London.
- Yelland, N. (2005). *Critical Issues in Early Childhood Education*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.