

# Sibship as a Mental Health Factor in Families - Transition after Birth

## *A Qualitative Sociological Case-Study about Siblings*

Siblings in families with more than one child develop the specific ability – at the horizontal level of the family – to cope with challenges after the birth of an additional child by re-organizing within the family. The newborn plays a crucial role during this process. Children in such families generate emotional capital which promotes positive mental health. The children influence each other by symmetrical reciprocity, collective coping and co-construction of reality.

The base data for this statement is a socio-scientific qualitative research project which deals with the dynamic within the family and amongst siblings especially in times of transition. Seven families were analyzed for data collection purposes. The choice of the subjects of study occurred through theoretical sampling. This means that additional cases are added successively over time until no new categories emerged out of the material. This is known as theoretical saturation.

Twenty-two children were included within the seven family-cases. They were also involved in the production of verbal and nonverbal data. Every family took part in four sittings. Four different kinds of data were collected and became valid by triangulation.

1<sup>st</sup> Session – first contact and generation of the genogram, hypothesis of the case-structure

2<sup>nd</sup> Session – diagnosis of the children with painting of animals representing the family members, observe patterns of interaction

3<sup>rd</sup> Session – open interview with the parents following a circular guideline of questioning

4<sup>th</sup> Session – Sit in with the whole family to work with the so-called family board

The theory of multiple enhancements of relationships amongst siblings was developed out of the analysis of the family case studies. Symmetric reciprocity, dyadic coping and co-construction of reality proved to be appropriate strategies of mastering the transition after birth and in achieving the new organization in the children's subsystem. Whilst the father is affording security and safety the mother make use of her routines and habits of previous births experiences. The children benefits from their interactive competences, which they had previously gained at the horizontal level of the family.

Babies function as door-openers for common basic needs by sending signals according to their own needs. They live according to their needs and act in an original manner and not out of societal conventions and rules. This shows the siblings that such behavior is still possible. When a baby is in the family, mothers show more empathy for all the children's needs and parent the children in a more child-centered way. Older siblings benefit emotionally and structurally after the birth. On the one hand, the mothers take parental leave and that reduces the amount of extra familiar caring for the older ones. On the other hand, the siblings experience parents who are geared to affection and commitment. All together the pattern of shared attention which mothers of more than one child internalize induces a subtle balanced level of interaction. Older siblings benefit as well from this situation. Hence the baby keeps and produces new room for the other children in the family. The children can experience the assumption of responsibility in addition to the parental observation; they identify themselves with nurturing attributes and try managing self-determined interaction with each other.

**Professionals who come into contact with siblings in different surroundings can use those results in their daily work with families of more than one child.**

- **The competent infant is an active part not only in relation to the mother but also towards his or her siblings.**
- **Older Siblings experience multiple enhancements in their relationships and do not suffer a trauma of dethroning after the birth of a younger sibling.**
- **Behaving like a baby does not mean retardation but rather is a special kind of interaction within the family after birth.**
- **Confidence in self-education and the ability to organize themselves amongst siblings comes as a relief to parents after birth.**

Thus the development of children in families with more than one child is promoted through the new interactions. Previously such a positive developmental attribute was only described amongst adult couples and in friendships in peer contexts in the socio-scientific research.