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Siblings' Experiences in Middle Childhood Predict Differences in College Graduation Status

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Graduating from college has significant implications for adults' long-term success, including employment, family formation, and health. A new longitudinal study investigated whether and how siblings' experiences in middle childhood predicted differences in their educational achievement, specifically, whether they graduated from college 15 years later. The study found that when siblings in middle childhood experienced less warmth in their relationships with each other, spent different amounts of time with their fathers, or thought their parents treated them unfairly relative to their siblings, they were more likely to differ in their college graduation status (i.e., graduating versus not graduating).

The study, conducted by researchers at The Pennsylvania State University and Arizona State University, is published in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

"Our findings have implications for parenting and family dynamics," suggests Xiaoran Sun, doctoral student in Human Development and Family Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, who led the study. "Parents need to be aware of how siblings can influence one another and monitor their children's interactions, as well as how they as parents treat their children."

Researchers collected information via home interviews and telephone calls from firstand second-born children from 152 families to determine whether and how siblings' experiences during middle childhood (ages 9 to 11) predicted differences in siblings' college graduation status (i.e., whether they had graduated 15 years later). Specifically, the researchers measured siblings' warmth toward one another and their time engaging in shared activities. They also examined differences between the siblings in mothers' and fathers' warmth toward their two children and the time parents spent with each child, as well as children's perceptions of their parents' fairness in how they were treated relative to their siblings. Fifteen years later, researchers determined whether the siblings had graduated 15 years later from college.

The youth were almost exclusively from European American families living in small cities, towns, and rural areas in Pennsylvania. The families were mostly working class to middle class.

Warmth between siblings in middle childhood predicted the likelihood of siblings having the same college graduation status (i.e., both graduating or both not graduating), even after considering differences in the siblings' middle- and high-school grades, the researchers found. When warmth was greater, the siblings tended to follow a similar path (i.e., both graduated or both didn't graduate); when there was less warmth, siblings more often had different graduation outcomes (i.e., one graduated and the other didn't).

In addition, in middle childhood, both the difference in the amount of time fathers spent with the two siblings and siblings' perceptions of their parents' fairness predicted the likelihood of siblings differing in graduation status. When there was a larger discrepancy in the amount of time fathers spent with the siblings, or when the siblings perceived that they were treated more unfairly by their parents, they tended to have different graduation outcomes (i.e., one graduated from college and the other didn't).

"Parent education and family programs should move beyond a focus on mother-child relationships by including fathers, and by studying the experiences of siblings," according to Susan McHale, Distinguished Professor of Human Development and Family Studies and professor of demography at The Pennsylvania State University, who coauthored the study.

The study was supported by the *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Sibling Experiences in Middle Childhood Predict Sibling Differences in College Graduation by Sun, X (The Pennsylvania State University), McHale, SM (The Pennsylvania State University), and Updegraff, KA (Arizona State University). Copyright 2018 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.