NEWS | POSTED JUNE 19, 2018

Good Relationships with Siblings May Buffer the Effects of Family Conflict

PRESS RELEASE / CHILD DEVELOPMENT: Embargoed for Release on June 19, 2018

PRESS RELEASE

Published

Tuesday, June 19, 2018 12:01am

Children's Vulnerability to Interparental Conflict: The Protective Role of Sibling Relationship Quality

Read the Child Development article:

WILEY ONLINE LIBRARY

Contact:

Jessica Efstathiou, Senior Media Relations and Communications Associate

Children who are exposed to hostile, escalating conflicts between parents are at increased risk for developing mental health problems. However, many children from homes marked by conflict don't experience significant psychological problems. A new longitudinal study sought to determine why some children are protected from the negative consequences of witnessing repeated hostility between their parents. It found that having a good relationship with a sibling may help buffer the distress of ongoing family conflict.

The study was done by researchers at the University of Rochester, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the University of Notre Dame. It appears in *Child Development*, a journal of the Society for Research in Child Development.

"Most children not only grow up with a sibling but spend more time interacting with siblings than with any other family member," according to Patrick T. Davies, professor of psychology at the University of Rochester, who led the study. "We showed that having a good relationship with a brother or sister reduced heightened vulnerability for youth exposed to conflicts between their parents by decreasing their tendencies to experience distress in response to later disagreements between their parents." The study defined a good relationship as one in which there were high levels of warmth and problem-solving and low levels of conflict and detachment.

The researchers looked at 236 families, including children with at least one sibling who wasn't a twin, their mothers, and their fathers. The families, most of which were White and middle class, were assessed when the children were 12, 13, and 14 years old.

Conflict between parents was gauged by observing arguments between mothers and fathers, who were asked in the lab to discuss topics of disagreement. The quality of sibling relationships was measured by mothers' verbal responses to interview questions about siblings' closeness and conflict, which the authors

acknowledge may limit accuracy. Adolescents reported on their distressed responses to family conflicts. And adolescents, mothers, and teachers completed questionnaires to assess theyouth's psychological problems (e.g., aggression, depression, anxiety, hyperactivity).

Adolescents who witnessed conflict between their parents had greater distressed responses to conflicts a year later, and greater distressed responses, in turn, predicted mental health problems in the teens in the subsequent year, the study found. However, teens who had good bonds with their siblings were protected from experiencing these distressed responses when they witnessed their parents' conflict, and ultimately were protected from subsequent mental health problems. These protective effects were similar for siblings of different ages and combinations of genders.

"Relationships with siblings protected teens whether we defined a good bond as one that included warmth and problem-solving skills or one that had low levels of destructive conflict or disengagement," explains Meredith Martin, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who coauthored the study. "Strengthening sibling relationships may not only directly foster children's psychological adjustment, but also offer new approaches to counteracting the risks associated with experiencing hostility and unresolved conflicts between parents."

The study's authors caution that because the families were mostly White and middle class, the findings should not be generalized to families of other races and socioeconomic statuses.

The National Institute of Mental Health funded the study.

###

Summarized from *Child Development*, *Children's Vulnerability to Interparental Conflict: The Protective Role of Sibling Relationship Quality* by Davies, PT, Parry, LQ, Bascoe, S (University of Rochester), Martin, MJ (University of Nebraska-Lincoln), and Cummings, EM (University of Notre Dame). Copyright 2018 The Society for Research in Child Development, Inc. All rights reserved.

Contact Information:
Jessica Efstathiou
Society for Research in Child Development
202-800-3255

jefstathiou@srcd.org