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Sibling influences on prosocial behavior

Claire Hughes¹, Gabrielle McHarg¹ and Naomi White²

Sibling relationships are characterized by familiarity and emotional intensity. Alongside frequent shared play, sibling interactions feature complementary interactions (e.g. teaching, caregiving) reflecting age-related asymmetries in socio-cognitive skills. These aspects may underpin sibling influences on prosocial behavior: theoretical accounts of social influences on prosocial behavior highlight emotion sharing, goal alignment, the intrinsically rewarding nature of social interaction, and scaffolding of social norms. Taking a fine-grained approach to prosocial behavior, we examine these processes in relation to sibling influences on children's comforting, sharing, and helping. Emergent themes include: developmental change in the nature of sibling influences on prosocial behavior, the need to consider sibling influences in the wider family context, and the importance of individual differences in the quality of sibling relationships.

Addresses

¹ Centre for Family Research, Department of Psychology, University of Cambridge, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK

² Department of Psychology, University of Otago, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand

Corresponding author: Hughes, Claire (ch288@cam.ac.uk)

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Introduction

Research interest in sibling relationships has increased dramatically over the past few decades (see [1••] for a recent review), but investigations of sibling influences on adjustment have focused largely on aggression and delinquency (e.g. [2]). As a result, sibling influences on prosocial behavior have been relatively overlooked. However, evidence from a recent meta-analytic review [3] indicates that, compared with preschoolers without siblings, those with siblings understand false belief (a socio-cognitive milestone that is closely linked to at least some forms of prosocial behavior [4]) at an earlier age than children without siblings. It is therefore plausible that the

simple presence of siblings may accelerate children's prosocial development.

Addressing this gap, we first outline the features of sibling relationships that may foster early prosocial behavior. As prosocial behavior is a multifaceted construct, we next consider the evidence for links between sibling relationship quality and each of the three key components: comforting, sharing, and helping [5]. We address questions of causal direction, the relative independence and interplay between sibling and parental influences, birth order effects in the nature and magnitude of sibling influences on prosocial behavior, and moderating effects of child and family characteristics. Finally we draw together emerging themes and offer suggestions for future directions.

Why might siblings matter for early prosocial behavior?

In his recent review of the literature on why young children help, comfort or share, Paulus [5] highlighted four different theoretical accounts, hinging on: first, emotion sharing and understanding; second, goal alignment or contagion; third, the intrinsically rewarding nature of social interaction; and fourth, scaffolding effects of social norms. Below, we outline the features of sibling relationships that help explain how each of these processes contributes to sibling influences on prosocial behavior.

First, as well as being ubiquitous, involuntary, and enduring, sibling relationships are characterized by a high degree of familiarity and a 'no-holds-barred' or 'warts-and-all' character [6]. Thus sibling interactions are rich in opportunities for learning about others' emotions. Second, unlike peer relationships, most sibling dyads include an age gap and hence an asymmetry in children's knowledge and skills [6]. As a result, younger siblings strive to follow in their older siblings' footsteps, making processes of goal alignment or contagion very relevant [2]. Third, alongside squabbles and bickering, sibling interactions are characterized by affection, companionship, and playfulness [6], such that sustaining enjoyable interactions with siblings may be a powerful motivator underpinning young children's displays of prosocial behavior. Fourth, sibling relationships exist within the context of other family relationships and so may act as a catalyst for other socializing forces. In particular, parental efforts to coach prosocial behavior are often aimed at fostering nurturing and harmonious interactions between children and their siblings, beginning with scaffolding early interactions with baby siblings [7]. Fifth, in many parts of the world siblings play a significant direct role in caregiving [8].

Each of the above factors helps explain why siblings might influence children's comforting, sharing, and helping. Our next step is to examine the nature of associations between sibling relationship quality and prosocial behavior, with a particular focus on establishing the *direction* of influence. Of particular note are the cross-lagged analyses conducted by Pike and Oliver [9**], based on responses from more than 2000 mothers who rated their children's adjustment and sibling relationships when the younger child was 4 and again at age 7. The key finding to emerge from these analyses was that sibling relationship quality showed similarly robust bidirectional links with both prosocial behavior and conduct problems. For prosocial behavior, there was an asymmetry in results: although sibling positivity predicted both children's later prosocial behavior, only older siblings' prosocial behavior predicted subsequent sibling positivity. In keeping with this idea of asymmetry, an earlier cross-sectional study showed that after controlling for parent-child relationship quality, sibling relationship quality predicted older but not younger siblings' prosocial behavior [10*]. One reason for these mixed findings may be that the nature and independence of sibling influences differs across different aspects of prosocial behavior, as detailed in the three sections below.

Comforting

For many young children, the arrival of a new baby provides a welcome opportunity to become a provider rather than a recipient of comfort and care. Alongside challenges such as loss of parental attention and changes to routines, the transition to siblinghood can therefore serve as a crucible for moral development [11*]. In this way, sibling influences on young children's prosocial behavior begin with the very birth of this relationship. However, children's reactions to the birth of a sibling show striking variability [12**], which reflects both the way in which the arrival of a new baby sibling heralds both positive and negative changes and the complex interplay between child and family factors that shape children's attitudes to new siblings. For example, a study that used a 'diaper-changing' session to observe firstborn children with their parents and baby siblings revealed that temperamental difficulties (low soothability) predicted firstborns' low levels of cooperative behaviors, but only in the context of low parental cooperation [13*]. Thus a supportive relationship between parents appears to enable temperamentally difficult children to display prosocial behaviors around infant siblings, perhaps by process of modeling. Beyond the literature on children's transition to siblinghood, studies of sibling influences on comforting behavior are very sparse. We therefore adopt a broader approach to consider sibling influences on moral sensibility and children's understanding of emotion understanding and false belief, as each of these contributes to children's comforting (e.g. [4,14–16]).

Sibling relationships provide a natural context for learning about the world of emotion: for example, Dunn [17] argues 'it is the emotional context and familiarity of the sibling relationship that can play an important part in the growth of understanding' (p. 319). Evidence to support this view comes from intervention programmes to improve sibling relationship quality, such as the Fun with Sisters and Brothers Program [18], which also improve children's perspective-taking [19]. Sibling influences on emotion understanding are also likely to be at least partly independent of parental influences, given the differences in these two types of relationship. In particular, siblings and parents contrast in the extent to which they are likely to: escalate conflict and/or engage in emotionally intense interactions. Siblings are also more likely than parents to be on the child's 'wave-length'. At the same time, family systems theory helps explain the interconnected nature of sibling and parental influences [20*], as illustrated by the diaper-change paradigm noted above.

Comforting behaviors toward siblings are likely to become much less frequent as younger siblings become more skilled in emotion regulation. One exception, however, is in families in which a sibling has a chronic illness. For example, a systematic review of adjustment in siblings of children with cancer has shown that, alongside understandable reactions of fear or worry, siblings of children with cancer showed increased maturity and empathy [21]. Thus just as attachment behaviors become less frequent as individuals develop their own autonomy but can be activated by stressful situations (e.g. [22,23]) it may be that developmental changes in siblings' comforting behaviors simply reflect an age-related decline in opportunities to be prosocial.

Sharing

Siblings are often children's first playmates and thus provide a training ground for reciprocal play, which involves sharing and collaboration [24–26]. While playing, siblings may share toys, pretence, and meaning [26]; in fact, children engage in more shared meaning strategies with siblings than with friends. These shared meaning strategies differ by birth order: older siblings explain the purpose of actions in play, while younger siblings add to the storyline [26]. This rich interaction enables prosocial learning as children negotiate how to divide toys and tasks and how to work together to accomplish play goals.

Sibling relationships are often marked by conflict over objects as children learn to share with each other [26] and experience the rewards of social interaction [5]. Learning to share with siblings may provide a model for prosocial behavior with other children: for example, three-year-olds' frequency of sharing with an older sibling has been shown to predict frequencies of sharing with unfamiliar same-sex peers at age six [27*]. Sibling influences can also be indirect and mediated by parental intervention and

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