

Efficacy of Sibling Preparation Classes

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the effectiveness of sibling preparation classes to facilitate the adjustment of a firstborn child to the birth of a sibling.

Design: Longitudinal study with five measurement occasions: third trimester of the mother's pregnancy and 1, 4, 8, and 12 months after the sibling's birth.

Setting: Communities in southeastern Michigan.

Participants: A total of 241 families, including mothers, fathers, and firstborn children.

Methods: Mothers and fathers completed questionnaires to assess changes in children's adjustment. Parents were also asked about their children's attendance at a sibling preparation class focused specifically on preparation for the newborn. Effects of attendance were tested using linear mixed models.

Results: Other than avoidance of the infant, children who attended sibling preparation classes did not differ from children who did not attend.

Conclusion: Sibling preparation classes for adjustment after the birth of an infant sibling had few effects on participants.

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Nearly 80% of children in the United States have at least one sibling, which underscores the fact that the birth of a sibling is a salient transition for most U.S. families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Individual children react differently to the infant sibling's birth: some children experience significant disruption, but others often respond positively (Oh, Volling, & Gonzalez, 2015; Song & Volling, 2015) or with little to no distress (Volling, 2012). Furthermore, children's initial reactions in the weeks after the sibling's birth were predictive of the quality of the relationship between siblings nearly a year later (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982). Because there is long-term stability in children's sibling relationships over time (Aldercotte, White, & Hughes, 2016; Dunn, Slomkowski, & Beardsall, 1994) and because poor sibling relationships are associated with externalization and internalization of behavior problems (Buist, Deković, & Prinzie, 2013), it is important to understand how best to prepare children and families to make the transition smoothly and establish a positive sibling relationship early in life.

Parents react in various ways to the impending transition. Some mothers may experience

feelings of guilt and sadness (Walz & Rich, 1983), which can hinder their ability to deal effectively with the behavior of the firstborn child (Young, Boyle, & Colletti, 1983). Mothers also worry about whether their children will accept their infant siblings and whether they can balance the care of two young children (Walz & Rich, 1983). Advice and guidance for parents on how to prepare their firstborn for the arrival of an infant may benefit children and parents as they undergo the potentially stressful transition that surrounds the birth of a second child.

Moreover, most parents are interested in facilitating positive sibling interaction between their children (Kramer, 2010) and many invest in media (e.g., books, DVDs) and classes to promote constructive sibling behaviors (Kramer & Ramsburg, 2002). Sibling preparation classes are one popular way to prepare a child for the birth of a sibling. These classes, originally established in the 1970s to prepare children to be present during birth (Dodge, 1985; Parma, 1979; Simkin, 1993), are still widely used in many hospitals. However, little empirical investigation has been conducted on the effectiveness of these classes.

There has been limited research into the effectiveness of sibling preparation classes for children's adjustment after the birth of a sibling.

Family Systems Theory underscores the interdependence of parent-child and partner subsystems in the family and that children's psychological adjustment is affected directly and indirectly by these different family relationships (Belsky, 1979; Cox & Paley, 2003; Minuchin, 1985). The Developmental Ecological Systems model of the transition to siblinghood also positions the firstborn within the family and highlights the effect of intrafamilial and extrafamilial systems that affect the firstborn's adjustment after the birth of a sibling (Volling, 2005). The Developmental Ecological Systems perspective and prior research also underscore the importance of consideration of multiple aspects of a child's adjustment after the birth of a sibling rather than a single indicator that may not capture the full range of adjustment issues. These include behavior problems (e.g., sleep, aggression, anxiety, withdrawal; Dunn, Kendrick, & MacNamee, 1981; Stewart, 1990; Volling et al., in press), quality of the early sibling relationship (Dunn & Kendrick, 1982; Oh, Volling, & Gonzalez, 2015; Song & Volling, 2015), and relationships with parents (Dunn & Kendrick, 1980; Teti, Sakin, Kucera, Corns, & Eiden, 1996; Touris, Kromelow, & Harding, 1995). The main goal of the current investigation was to examine whether sibling preparation class helped children adjust to the birth of siblings.

Sibling Preparation Classes

Sibling preparation classes were initially designed to prepare children for their mothers' hospitalizations and the births of their siblings; it was expected that participation in the birth experience would have a positive effect on sibling interactions (Parma, 1979). The demand for sibling preparation classes has continued, and they are offered in many hospital and community settings. The purpose of these classes, however, has shifted to include preparation for the firstborn's new role as a sibling and the changes that may occur during this transition (Storr & Robinson, 1998; Wilford & Andrews, 1985). To accomplish this goal, class activities often include tours of the maternity ward (Johnsen & Gaspard, 1985), art projects (Keller, 1991), and discussions about infant care, including diapering a doll (Spero, 1993).

Despite the popularity of these classes, only two sets of researchers to date have attempted to evaluate their efficacy through the provision of prebirth and postbirth assessments of children's adjustment. Among randomly selected children, Wilford and Andrews (1985) found no significant differences between those children who attended a sibling preparation class and those who did not based on mothers' reports of children's behaviors before the birth of the second child and 4 weeks after the birth. In a nonrandomized design, however, Fortier, Carson, Will, and Shubkagel (1991) reported that mothers whose children attended the class believed they were better able to cope with their children's behaviors and observed significantly fewer sibling rivalry behaviors at 1 month postpartum than mothers whose children had not attended the class. Although both studies were a pre-/postclass design, the postclass assessments occurred 1 month after the birth, so there was no indication of how long-lived the effects were or how children's behaviors might change over the long term in the year after the birth. Thus, there is a critical need to address the effectiveness of sibling preparation classes using pre- and post-birth longitudinal research designs that assess multiple aspects of children's functioning in the initial months shortly after the birth and over the course of the year after the birth.

Methods

Design and Setting

Our study included a longitudinal, prospective design in which mothers were expecting a second child and included families recruited from southeastern Michigan communities in a 50-mile radius from a large Midwestern U.S. university. The design consisted of five measurement occasions: the third trimester of a mother's pregnancy and 1, 4, 8, and 12 months after the sibling's birth. During these times, mothers and fathers were asked to report on children's behavioral and emotional adjustment (e.g., aggression, withdrawal, sleep problems), children's social interactions with their infant siblings, and whether or not children attended a sibling preparation class before the birth. Parents also completed the Attachment Q-Sort to assess children's attachment relationship with mothers and fathers. The study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and families were compensated \$300 for their participation across all five times.

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